

DEBUNKING THE ‘LITERACY MYTH’ FOR SLAVES: FREDERICK DOUGLASS’ NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: AN AMERICAN SLAVE AND HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S UNCLE TOM’S CABIN, Komi BEGEDOU, Essozimna DAO (Université de Lomé – Togo)

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Abstract

‘Literacy Myth’ is, on the one hand, the mistaken assumption that literacy leads automatically to economic freedom and social emancipation; on the other hand, it is the fallacy that literate persons think better than non-literate ones, as shown in Slave Narratives. This study discusses the debatable role that literacy plays in the emancipation of slaves in their struggle to free themselves from the shackles of slavery in the mainstream America lifestyles and its revealed limits. Through the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which interprets characters’ motivations for specific actions, the study has found that characters’ trust in education for emancipation is challenged by the individual moral and social commitments.

Keywords: education, slaves, ‘literacy myth’, freedom, integration

DÉMYSTIFIER LE « MYTHE DE L’ALPHABÉTISATION » DES ESCLAVES: UNE ÉTUDE DE NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: AN AMERICAN SLAVE DE FREDERICK DOUGLASS’ ET DE UNCLE TOM’S CABIN DE HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Résumé

Le ‘mythe de l’alphabétisme’, d’une part est cette conception erronée selon laquelle l’alphabétisme libère automatiquement des défis économiques et garantit l’émancipation sociale, et d’autre part, c’est l’illusion que ceux qui ont bénéficié de l’éducation formelle raisonnent mieux que ceux qui ne le sont pas, comme suggéré dans les récits d’esclaves. Cette étude traite du rôle discutable que l’alphabétisme a joué dans la vie des esclaves dans leur lutte pour leur émancipation vis-à-vis des maîtres esclavagistes. Elle s’interroge aussi de la fonction de la littératie dans la difficile intégration des esclaves dans le style de vie de la culture dominante américaine et de ses limites constatées. À travers l’approche psychanalytique freudienne axée sur l’interprétation des faits et gestes, l’étude a trouvé que la confiance desdits personnages en leurs projets d’émancipation est défiée par la morale et les engagements sociaux.

Mots clés : éducation, esclaves, ‘mythe de l’alphabétisme’, liberté, intégration

Introduction

According to H. Graff (2010, p.17), an educational historian, “Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility”. Human rights defenders regard literacy as basic human right and a tool for productive citizenship and fulfilled life. This point of view is backed by S. Olaniran (2020, p. 1) who opines: “literacy is considered as

basic human right as it has been linked to higher levels of dignity, self-esteem, economic well-being and improved public health". From the foregoing, it can be argued that mastering the alphabet (literacy) for a person is different from formal education, or a pointedly training that provides high competence and qualification. Arguably, it is believed that literacy is limited to the ability a person has to read, write and decode words. This definition of literacy is suggested in some Slave Narratives such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that tone out the delusion of literacy where in the nineteenth-century in American plantations, enslaved people heavily relied on literacy to emancipate themselves. These narratives reveal the way literacy enabled and empowered slaves to gain freedom. The case of Douglass in his *Narrative* is revealing. In fact, Douglass is a slave who, through literacy, ends up a free person. However, it is revealed through Slave Narratives that literacy as a tool of white hegemony, sought to exclude and dominate illiterate Blacks. Even when some enslaved people strove to acquire literacy, the expected end result is a delusion to them at the end of the day. In the works under study, though both writers' authorial intention is to praise literate slaves' achievements, they still need white abolitionists' assistance. D. Royer (1994, p. 363) analyzes this situation in this way: "this contrast marks one of the contradictory ways in which literacy developed among slaves".

The intention of this study is not to argue that literacy has not been of any use to slaves. The paper holds a nuanced posture and draws attention to some facts well known in Slave Narratives that compels readers to reassess and question the role of literacy for slaves. The argumentation is built on the proved fact that literacy constitutes a dependent and critical variable in ones' search for better living conditions. Alone, literacy is insufficient to make a successful independent person. Thus, one should take into account some other factors that can conjugate with literacy to help overcome the limitations rooted in racial, historical, cultural, gender and religious differences.

Some questions are worth asking when considering the place of literacy in slaves' lives. How is the concept of literacy used through the two selected works to promote slaves' emancipation? To what extent can literate black slaves be considered as failed elite despite their acquisition of literacy? An attempt to address these questions constitutes the backbone of this study.

This paper attempts to prove wrong the well-spread idea according to which the absence of literacy has been a key factor to the enslavement of black people through centuries and, as a matter of fact, hindered their social, political and economic emancipation. It posits that learning to read and write is not sufficient for a person to fully realize their dreams. It furthermore argues that relative social success of literate slaves in Slave Narratives hides a great uneasiness that will be addressed in this study.

The analysis is undertaken through the classical psychoanalytic perspective of literature. This theory is undoubtedly linked to its first great theoretician Sigmund Freud. Freudian psychoanalysis is cherished for its enlightenment on the theory of repression, sexuality, the complex of Oedipus and the interpretation of dreams. It is

well known that the psychoanalyst works principally with mental representations. Literary critics make use of this theory to offer readers insights in characters' actions and reactions as well as authors' intention while creating stories. Psychoanalytical criticism in this study helps to scrutinize the reasons behind Douglass' and Stowe's emphasis on literacy and why they have decided to silence its limits in their writings. According to K. Green and J. Le Bihan (1996, p. 147), "the idea that there are unconscious processes, operations in mind that cannot be represented, is the key concept of psychoanalysis". This theory infers that our deeds and our utterances take root in our minds, and inversely language expresses our mind. When language does not, it rather reveals the unconscious, the troubles in mind. Thus, applying this theory to my corpus texts allows me to unveil inner proceedings of characters' minds that culminate in their visible deeds. It also helps decipher Douglass' and Stowe's intention with their characters on the importance they gave to literacy in their works and their silence on its limits.

The paper is structured around two parts. The first one discusses the importance of literacy for slaves in the context of American slavery. The second section scrutinizes ways in which the overwhelming trust in literacy turned into a delusion for slaves

1. Emancipating Slaves through Literacy as Portrayed in Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Beecher Stowe's works

Literacy played a great role in the process of slaves' emancipation during human bondage period in America. In a context where all means are good for slaveholders to keep their slaves under perpetual control, one can easily understand illiteracy and ignorance as tools for these slaveholders to keep their slaves. Being aware of this strategy, some slaves began to search the fatal arm that could destroy the master. Then, some slaves thought of strategies and tactics to overcome the restrictions that prevent them to acquire literacy. For instance, Frederick Douglass, once being aware of the role of literacy in his enslavement, resolved to acquire it "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when least expected it...and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn" (Douglass 44-45).

Anti-literacy laws for slave communities and the cultural racism rampant in the period that promoted black people's illiteracy are barriers to slaves' literacy. Among the strategies used to get literate could be mentioned autodidacts, those who were secretly assisted, and were taught in Churches. Douglass for example is helped at first by his mistress for his literacy. If Douglass is to be believed in his narrative, his appetite for literacy did not cease with the refusal of his master. After the prohibition of his master, he will continue to receive his literacy courses in exchange of bread. "...This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge" (Douglass 49). As this short passage implies, Douglass was resolved to learn to read and write at any cost. To attain this objective, he relies on the misery of his white children playmates from whom he could be taught how to read and write in exchange of the food to survive. Along in the same line, M. Span (2005, p. 26) remarks that: "Despite the

societal conditions or restrictions imposed upon them, free and enslaved African Americans' sheer determination in acquiring an education illustrated the group's historic fortitude, ability, and appreciation of learning, freedom, and universal self-improvement".

As J. Cornelius (1960, p. 171) contends, literacy acquired by slaves can be divided into two parts according to the ideology it promotes: Bible literacy and liberating literacy. The Bible literacy has played a double role in slave community during antebellum period among slave communities. Firstly, it has helped them to know how to read and personally understand the Bible's teaching for their own salvation. Secondly, it has helped Bible literate to counter argue the passages in the Scriptures used by proslavery Christians to justify the enslavement of black people. The example of the 'Curse of Ham' theory that argues that the Bible sanctions black people's enslavement.

To continue in line with the idea of the preceding paragraph, Douglass in his narrative makes reference to the exegesis of biblical slavery by denouncing it in these terms: "If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters" (Douglass 18). Through this passage, the writer invites the reader to realize the blatant incongruity of proslavery Christianity line of reasoning to make the enslavement of Blacks a divine-sanctioned practice. Douglass points out the case of biracial people to whom it is difficult to apply the racist reading of Scriptures. It is worth to mention that during slavery time in America, the proslavery advocates claimed that the black race is fitted to human thralldom according to their reading of Scriptures whereas abolitionists like Douglass refute the idea. This brings S. Haynes (2002, p. 8) to writes that: "...by the early colonial period a racialized version of Noah's curse had arrived in America. In fact, the writings of abolitionists indicate that by the 1670s the 'curse of Ham' was being employed as a sanction for black enslavement". To make short, liberating literacy as its name indicates aims at making the slave community open-minded, reasonable human beings who can think how to emancipate themselves from the atrocity and arbitrariness of a slave-sanctioning regime and race-based society.

Douglass and Stowe believe firmly in the power of literacy to end slavery. They mistakenly thought that literacy could help slaves fully emancipate themselves as their narratives imply. Both writers portrayed how it is difficult to slave community to acquire literacy. However, they do not renounce to show how rewarding literacy could be once acquired. Stowe's narrator describes how the illiterate Uncle Tom is instructed in reading by the son of his master, George Shelby:

He was very busily intent at this moment on a slate lying before him, on which he was carefully and slowly endeavoring to accomplish a copy of some letters, in which operation he was overlooked by young Mas'r George, a smart, bright boy of thirteen, who appeared fully to realize the dignity of his position as instructor.

'Not that way, Uncle Tom, - not that way,' said he, briskly, as Uncle Tom laboriously brought up tail of his g the wrong side out; "that makes a q, you see (Stowe 68-69).

Although, it is not explicit in the passage above, Uncle Tom's literacy served mainly for religious matters. Thus, one could realize that the same Uncle Tom latter in the story instructing his fellow slaves how to behave in a Christian way. As J. Cornelius (1960, p. 171) observes, "Literate slaves also taught others and served as conduits for information within a slave communication network. Some were able to capitalize on their skills in literacy as a starting point for leadership careers after slavery ended". If for the character Uncle Tom, literacy serves to spread biblical virtues to his (slave) community, Douglass uses his literacy abilities to promote his freedom ideology and become an antislavery leader and famous writer. In this vein, L. MacKethan (1986, p. 57) is compelled to write that, "His most important purpose, it seems to me, was to connect conversion to literacy in the minds of his readers in order to establish the power of the slave writer to alter reality". A challenge that Douglass overcomes in his narrative was to belie the apprehension that black people are incapable of intellectual activity.

Understandably, slaveholders consider slaves' literacy a threat to their authority and the slave economy on which they depend upon. They thought literate slaves would incite a slave insurrection against white masters who, by far, are dependent upon the slave labor and slave economy. The example of young Douglass illustrates how literacy is important to slaves. As his personal story shows, from his illiterate state, the literate slave become a writer of biography; most importantly become a freed slave.

Mr. Auld's prohibition to Douglass to literacy arises the curiosity of the latter to acquire literacy. Sentences like "If you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible, it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it" (Douglass 44). From that point, Douglass becomes more curious to discover the hidden agenda behind Mr. Auld promoting his illiteracy. In this perspective, M. Span (2005, p. 28) writes:

For nearly four centuries, learning in spite of opposition has been theme in the educational history of African Americans. No example demonstrates this contention than the denied or restricted educational opportunities for free and enslaved African Americans during the antebellum, or pre-Civil War, era. Their continuous and oftentimes deleterious quest to acquire some level of education epitomized African Americans' legacy of perseverance amid overtly oppressive and extremely hostile conditions. In some instances, free and enslaved African Americans' efforts to acquire the rudiments of learning during this time period were ingenious; in others - given the insurmountable odds and conditions - they were heroic.

Apart from the obvious link that readers of slave narratives can establish between literacy and the empowering of slave community, there exists opportunities that the individual (slave) can make between their mind and the world unknown to him. This helps slaves to be opened to the world that is forbidden to them because of the harshness of the slaveholding regime that set up some constraints on slaves. Literacy in this context comes as a means for an enslaved person with their ability to read and to extend themselves beyond the constraints of the body and geography imposed on them. It is because Douglass can read that he could imagine a better life

outside his locked world under different masters and the unalienable rights as a human being. For L. Barrett (1995, p. 420):

Because literacy provides the most manifest formalization of the life of the mind, it is central in this elaborate intellectual and social construct. Literacy provides manifest testimony of the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body. To restrict African Americans to lives without literacy is seemingly to immure them in bodily existences having little or nothing to do with the life of the mind and its representation. Conversely, to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body.

Literacy matters a lot for the downtrodden slaves in American slaveholding regime. For that reason, those of them who got an opportunity to get a course of literacy do not hesitate despite the danger that awaited them if discovered in so doing. Literacy has the power to determine the individual identity, change the personality and the social status. This belief is substantiated by M. Span (2005, p. 47) in the following terms:

Literacy had specific purposes in antebellum black communities. North of slavery, free blacks perceived literacy or an education as a chief means to challenge their societal status, slavery, segregation, and the myriad of inferiority theories circulating about them throughout the nation. Segregation, by law or cultural practice, restricted or denied many of their educational opportunities as citizens, but it did not discourage them from establishing their own schools and services for the betterment of themselves, their communities, and their race. Southern freeborn blacks also viewed education as a means of social mobility and protection from the vices burdening them in a racialized society.

Another reason that haunted slave masters to allow their slaves from learning to read and write is that literate slaves may be imbibed with the notions of equality and liberty as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution claims and other privileges inherently to a human being on American soil. In this same vein, M. Urofsky (1994, p. iv) considers that: "Documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are bedrock of American political democracy". That is what Douglass describes in his *Narrative of the danger of getting educated*.

Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now", said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, of no value his master (Douglass 44).

This quote invites readers to realize how literacy was a threat to the slaveholding system. Douglass seeking ways to his freedom concludes that literacy was one way to reach freedom. "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it" (Douglass 44-45). This passage informs on this moment of epiphany

where Douglass discovers unexpectedly the importance of literacy in one's life, truer for a slave, seems to be the starting point for his crusade against enslavement and his battle for freedom to all slaves.

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, the dramatic situation of slaves is not restricted to their inability to read or write. What matters for them is what you can read or write and how important it can affect your life. Through their literary works, Douglass and Stowe do not find any difficult in telling their readership the great impact literacy has on literate slaves. Along in the same line of reasoning E. Tchéki (2019, p. 20) observes that: "Literacy means to be able to understand and decipher the conspiracies that are held against the colored people. People without the ability to read, write and count are made to expand racist propagandas without really being aware of that". From a psychological perspective, one can deduce that it is because Stowe and Douglass view literacy as liberating tool for slaves that preaching literacy to blacks is recurrent in their literary works as a zealous Christian would do with the gospel for nonbelievers for its redemptive role.

Throughout their literary works, literate characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the literate Douglass in his autobiography are those can understand how they (slaves) are being manipulated by the white masters to accumulate more profit on their back. Consequently, black literates are open-minded persons who claim their right and question the authority of their masters. In Stowe's novel, the character Georges Harris because he can read and write overtly puts in question the authority of his master,

My master! And who made him my master? That's what I think of - what right has he to me? I'm a man as much he is. I'm a better man than he is. I know more about business than he does. I know more about business than he does; I am a better manager than he is; I can read better than he can; I can write a better hand, - I've learned it all myself, no thanks to him, - I've learned it in spite of him; and now what right has he to make me a dray-horse of me? (Stowe 58).

As this quote indicates, there is undoubtedly a link between literacy and personal empowerment. Literacy can help an individual to overcome personal obstacles and become the master of their own fate. In the case of the character George Harris, his abilities in literacy coupled with his inborn skills allowed him to invent a machine that revolutionized the work for his masters' benefice. His various readings probably opened his eyes on his rights as a human being and the equality among humans. Thus, as intellectual elite, George Harris claims vehemently individual possessiveness.

2. Challenging the "Literacy Myth" as a Tool for Total Liberation of Slaves in Douglass' and Stowe's Selected Texts

This part elaborates on the incompleteness of literacy for the liberation of slaves. A painstaking analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* reveals that the received idea that literacy frees and empowers slaves toward their emancipation is not all true. Thus, here our critical analysis consists in uncovering instances in both literary works considered and demonstrate how slaves' reliance in literacy did not meet their expectations.

As will be evident in the subsequent paragraphs, the fact that some believe in the salvation of literacy reveal a fortiori that oversimplifications and misunderstanding occurred in critics' analysis while some overestimated the role of literacy in the process of slaves' emancipation. In the scope of this study, one may speculate that both authors in some ways subtly lead their readership to read with the grain of the great benefice of literacy. Thus, in-depth analysis and interpretation conducted through the analysis of Douglass' and Stowe's narratives reveal that expectations on literacy are not fulfilled at the end of the day. To the question to know whether literacy promises of freedom and emancipation have been kept for slaves in Slave Narratives as expected, the answer is a flat no. This being said that does not mean that literacy was of no use for slave community. It was discussed in the first part.

As said earlier, the much value attributed to literacy in Slave Narratives seems to forget that the acquisition of literacy for slaves is embedded in socio-cultural structures, particularly in a racialized and discriminative society like the pre-1965 America prejudicial to colored people. An averred reader could notice how Douglass and Stowe overestimated the role of literacy in slaves' lives in their works. The contradictory evidence to the token idea that literacy is a liberating tool for slaves that a reader can uncover is through characters like Uncle Tom and George in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This applies also for Douglass in his narrative. Though they became literate, their lot in the slaveholding system remains almost the same as illiterate slaves. Even if one cannot deny them some small achievements at individual level. Literacy for slaves' emancipation seems to be a symbolic expression of their wants for the beginning of self-affirmation. Truly speaking, literacy was not decisive for slaves' emancipation as the analysis of literary works considered for this study unveils.

Arguably, the liberating discourse of literacy reveals itself at times not practical even useless. Douglass in his narrative, after having praised the merits of literacy and cursed enslavers, he is reminded by a prediction made by Master Hugh, his master, that haunts him. All of a sudden, his positive discourse on literacy changes. Then, Douglass perceives literacy as a curse.

As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity, I have wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile of my town (Douglass 50-51).

As this quote invites the reader to reassess the role of literacy for slaves, we can deduce that, of course, literacy can equip a person like Douglass with the necessary knowledge and language to have a severe critique on the paper against the slaveholding system in America but a black holding antislavery rhetoric is pitifully useless. The bitter reality is there. At this time, he is aware of the fact knowledge, as a means to combat slavery's oppression, is a very theoretical point of view. Of

course, with literacy, Douglass is now open-minded; he sees the injustices of slaveholding system in America. Things are self-evident to him despite his intellectual capacities he remains a dwarf before the giant demon of America slaveholding system. His powerlessness in the situation is summed up in the autobiography by: "It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out" (Douglass 50). As the excerpt infers, he realizes how he is victim of injustices of a slaveholding and racist American society.

As the preceding paragraph argues, Douglass reveals the psychological trauma he experiences after his acquisition of literacy. This psychological tournament is the results of the racial discrimination that Douglass goes through in a slavish society. It comes as a realization of a prophecy of Master Hugh who warned him against his appetite for literacy. The recognition of the boomerang effect of literacy by Douglass who is too eager to learn to read and write contradicts his ideological views on literacy. Then, he admits in half-word as anti-black literacy proponents who consider literate slaves as a threat to their institution on which they depend upon.

A striking example that disproves that literacy was not redemptive to slaves is the case of the protagonist Uncle Tom in Stowe's novel. In fact, he is a slave who is initiated to write and read by the son of his master. What one can expect from such a character to undertake initiatives to free himself from his from the wretchedness of slavery by claiming his civil rights or as a bible literate by denouncing the hermeneutical interpretation of some selected biblical passages put forth by proslavery Christian advocates to counter argue with what he could read in the Bible. Unfortunately, this has never been the concern of Uncle Tom. What matters for him is to live his own understanding of Christian life. The narrator describes him as "a sort of patriarch in religious matters, in the neighborhood" (79). From that angle, Uncle Tom's role is to inculcate the morale (that includes not rebel against the master) of Christianity "in the language of a pious negro" in his neighborhood (Stowe 79). Submissive to his white masters whatever the cruelty inflicted on him, Uncle Tom is ready to agree on the nonviolence and slave condition discourse that white proslavery masters make him ingurgitate. A passage in the novel that shows it is this moment in a discussion between the slave trader Haley and Uncle Tom's master, M. Shelby, who sees the good effect of religion of a slave for the master:

No; I mean really, Tom is a good, steady; sensible, pious fellow. He got religion at a camp-meeting, four years ago; and I believe he really did get it. I've trusted him, since then, with everything I have, -money, house, horses, _and let him come and go round the country; and I always found him true and square in everything...yes, I consider religion a valeyable thing in a nigger, when it's the genuine article, and no mistake (Stowe 42).

When opportunity was given to him to run away from the control of his master, the literate Uncle Tom has kindly declined the proposal. In the novel, Uncle Tom could have fled to Canada but he resigns because as a Christian he cannot betray the master. It readily comes as:

Tom, says I to him, 'trust you, because I think you're Christian _ I know you wouldn't cheat.' Tom comes back, sure enough; I knew he would. Some low fellow, they say, said to him _ 'Tom, why don't make tracks to Canada?' 'Ah, master trusted me, and I couldn't,'-they told me about it" (Stowe 43).

By so doing, the protagonist Uncle Tom thinks he obeys to God who recommends slaves to obey their masters. These successive events of naiveté will lead Uncle Tom to a tough life under slavery though choices are left to him as a literate to be free. His belief in a better afterlife that Christianity has promised him made him voluntarily refuse to enjoy the fruit of literacy though he is in need. Uncle Tom's sad situation stems from his personal choice to let Christianity's dogmas have an ascendancy on him. When in the novel his master Simon Legree was threatening him to death, Uncle Tom's answer is his firm belief to God whatever the case. "I'll hold on. The Lord may me, or not help; but I'll to him, and believe to him to the last!" (554). To get this afterlife, literacy Uncle Tom acquired reveal itself to be useless for him in his present world on earth.

One claim of literacy is that it helps to get out of the miserable condition under which one was before getting literate. The analysis of the literary works under study does not confirm this postulate. Literate slaves are being constantly assisted by kindhearted person in their quest for liberty. Georges Harris, literate character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is helped by the Quakers, a Christian organization that helps runaway slaves. It reads in the novel between Georges and a Quaker called Simeon that:

...said Simeon. 'And now thou must lie by quietly this day, and to-night, at ten o'clock, Phineas Fletcher will carry thee onward to next stand, -thee and the rest of they company. The pursuers are hard after thee; we must not delay'.

"If that is the case, why wait till evening?" said George (Stowe 225).

As the above quote implies, until then the literate character Georges Harris need the assistance in his search for freedom despite his being literate. The one who claims at the beginning that: "I can read better than he can; I can write a better hand, -I've learned it all myself, and no thanks to him," (Stowe 60). Now Georges Harris comes to contradict himself or at the least of the use of literacy he has acquired, of which he prides himself. In face of the danger to be recaptured, he does no more allude to the fact that he is literate person. In such scenarios, one questions himself if literacy was useful for the slave in such dread conditions.

When one cannot claim the basic rights in his society, one questions himself if literacy is of any use for him. The literate character George Harris is not capable to stand his master and claims his rights as U.S. born. As one can feel through the reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Georges Harris' sad and unwillingly journey through American, European and African continents in search for freedom calls to rethink the role of literacy in relation to freedom for slaves. His is uprooted in the south of America, fled to the northern states; then to Europe and finally landed in Liberia, in Africa. In this concrete example, one cannot argue for the positive role of literacy to slaves. In such case, one can admit that literacy has been an illusion for literate slaves. Consequently, one can talk of the 'literacy myth', i.e. the unachieved expectations of literacy. As H. Graff (2010, p. 21) observes, "Myths can be

expressions of collective desires of the many and the few of their differential agency and the power. Perhaps the literacy myth expresses a hope that literacy alone is enough to end poverty, elevate human dignity and promote a just and democratic world”.

The concept of literacy myth applied to literate slaves in Slave Narratives should not be misunderstood or misinterpreted. It tries to explain the different contingencies that prevent slaves to fully emancipate themselves through the acquisition of literacy despite the huge hope placed in it. The term ‘myth’ in this context does not mean something that cannot be explained, beyond the rationale or simply a fictive story. It insists on the fact that literacy alone could not meet all the expectations of literate slaves. H. Graff (2010, p. 20) does not say the opposite when he writes that:

Yet the central, critical role of myth is often misunderstood: Such attitudes about literacy represent a ‘myth’ because they exist apart from and beyond empirical evidence that might clarify the actual functions, meanings and effects of reading and writing. Like all myths, the literacy myth is not so much a falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes. Contradicting popular notions, myth is not synonymous with the fictive or the false. By both definition and means of cultural work, myths cannot be wholly false. For a myth to gain acceptance, it must be grounded in at least some aspects of perceived reality and cannot explicitly contradict all ways of thinking or expectations.

What one should understand from the above quote is that literacy myth as employed in the scope of this study should not be perceived as a negation of the importance of literacy for slaves in American plantations. It acknowledges the role of literacy but argues and maintains that literacy was not so a decisive factor for slaves’ socio-economic emancipation.

When carefully analyzed, the two literary works concerned in this article indicate that literacy strongly influences the life-chances of persons who got an opportunity to learn how to read and write. In fact, what literacy can do to a person is to help them to change their behavior from the ignorance to rationality, openness, information and opportunity. Through the analysis of Douglass’ narrative and Stowe’s novel there is no significant, clear point of transition of literate slaves between their newly literate culture and the traditional oral culture in which the racist and slaveholding mainstream America tried to keep them.

There has been a little change in the life of literate slaves compared to their pre-literate condition and in some extent to the whole slave community because of the institutionalized racism that black race is victim of. As the narrative of Douglass implies, the literate Douglass is not the same as what he was before taking the courses from his mistress. He has become open-minded on the issues pertaining to his rights as human being, declaring that: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass 72); and by being courageous enough to fight back Mr. Covey, his master (Douglass 77). Unfortunately, hope placed in literacy by black slaves is too high given the racial prejudice rampant in the slaveholding America. This can be analyzed from a psychoanalytic stand by pointing out the derailing of our psyche to support what seems irrational or

impossible as P. Gherovici (2013, p. 11) contends: "The psychoanalytic literature provides many examples of how intelligent people end up supporting assumptions that are irrational, racist, classicist, ethnocentric, and ultimately impossible, in spite of all their good will". Indeed, Douglass and Stowe failed in overestimating the role of literacy, which in their conviction can help the black slaves fully emancipate themselves in a society where the greed of capitalism was in its apogee and heavily depending on slaves.

The relative success of literate slaves found itself with the hard reality of the coexistence of the multicolored American society. Douglass in his autobiographical book after celebrating the freedom he has as a former slave that he may attribute to the fact that he has previously acquired literacy, he comes to realize that being literate or educated in American society can be a prime for one personal life not a privilege to be boast of. An illustration of this can be read as follow:

It was the first work, the reward of which was entirely my own. There was no Master Hugh standing ready, the moment I earned the money, to rob me of it. I worked that day with a pleasure I had never before experienced. I was at work for myself and a newly-married life. It was to me the starting-point of a new existence. When I got through with that job, I went in pursuit of a job of calking; but such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white calkers, that refused to work with me, and of course, I could get no employment. Finding my trade of no immediate benefit, I threw off my calking habiliments, and prepared myself to do any kind of work I could get to do (Douglass 113).

It appears obvious from this excerpt that, though Douglass is literate and qualified for the calking job, he ends up leaving it because of the racial prejudice rampant in American society. This brings me to be of the view of Royer for whom, "When we look closely and examine the role literacy played in these slaves' lives, patterns of continuity and contradiction serve as analytic and interpretive concepts which helps us to reinterpret these roles and better understand the slave's relation to the ruling culture of nineteenth century America" (J. Royer, 1994, p. 363). This being said, it should be agreed that literacy as a tool that will save slaves from their low position and miserable condition in a racist culture is a mere dream. This pushes African American to play the survivalist as Douglass pathetically admits, 'and prepared myself to do any kind of work I could get to do'.

From a psychoanalytic stand that posits that we tend to repress unhappy psychological events, one can run into Douglass and Stowe's psyches to unveil their unresolved conflicts that prevent them to write black on white in their respective literary works that literacy was not decisive for the black slave's emancipation. This conflicting situation can be uncovered by the reader in contexts where their literate slaves still struggle to win social recognition. The deliberate choice for both authors to keep silence on the limits on literacy for slaves though it appears obvious in their writings informs on how their "unconscious problems keep asserting themselves over the course of the story" to quote L. Tyson (2015, p. 34). A profound meaning of how repression mechanism functions in psychoanalysis runs through this assertion by the same literary critic.

The *unconscious* is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them. The unconscious comes into being when we are very young through the *repression*, the expunging from consciousness, of these unhappy psychological events. However, repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions. Rather, it gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience: we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to 'play out' without admitting it ourselves, our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress (L. Tyson, 2015, p. 12-13).

From the finding above, it is obvious for us that authors considered for this study unconsciously were not aware of scenes and instances in their writings that can be interpreted as limits of literacy for slaves. Even if they knew insufficiencies of being able to read and write, asserting that in their literary works is like deceiving slaves in their efforts from getting literacy.

An in-depth analysis of Frederick Douglass' narrative of 1845 and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* invite readers and scholars to reassess the role of literacy for slaves in Slaves Narratives. Through these narratives, the role of literacy is ambiguous though in overall evaluation, the balance sheet is more a disappointment for slaves. This confirms the statement of H. Graff as quoted by E. Stevens (1981, p. 117) a prominent scholar of the concept 'literacy myth' who argues that literacy is at best, a "mediating and reinforcing factor, not an autonomous or determining one". It is a 'mediating and reinforcing factor' for literate slaves like Douglass to become a free person who works for himself, a writer. It is 'not an autonomous or determining one' in the sense that despite slaves' acquisition of literacy, their acceptance and integration in a white-dominated society as well the claim of equal rights and opportunities seemed too pretentious. This relative failure of literate slaves is due to the fact they do not acquire the prerequisite to literacy. For J. Royer (1994, p. 367-8), "the illiterate must first understand his or her own role as a subject, already acting in and with the world, already transforming it through work". This quote is emblematic as it advises the procedure that illiterate slaves would have followed for their betterment. In the coercive situation of slaves in American plantations, their acquisition of literacy should not be limited of the self-pride of a hard-earned reward but how this reward was helpful in the process to become an independent individual or more broadly beneficial to slave community in the quest for freedom and emancipation.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to demystify the 'Literacy Myth' through Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First, the study has pointed out the merits of literacy for the enslaved as portrayed in the chosen literary works. Second, the research has unveiled from the selected works that literacy for the enslaved Blacks under the American slaveholding system was not decisive for the total liberation of the latter. It is due to the oppressive atmosphere in which they lived and which was created purposefully to maintain them in perpetual slavery. The study has found that though literacy presents some limitations, it is difficult to argue for its

uselessness for Blacks under slavery. Through the psychoanalytic analysis of the characters like Uncle Tom, George in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Douglass in his autobiography, the paper concluded that the expectations of literate slaves were fulfilled. The slaves dreamed of becoming emancipated, successful and independent. This can be explained by the fact there are other criteria when taken alone, literacy is insufficient to make a successful independent person. The study has proven wrong the received idea that literacy was redemptive to illiterate black slaves under pre-1865 America, infamous period in American history particularly for African Americans. Douglass and Stowe's double-consciousness vis-à-vis of literacy can be explained by the fact they do not like sounding too pessimistic of black literacy in a context where institutional racism and the mightier hand of the slaveholder reign. The campaign for slaves' literacy in Slave Narratives though its limited efficiency for the latter can be explained in one way: the cultural promises of literacy are real that it is impossible to argue against it. The case of convinced abolitionists writers like Douglass and Stowe. Given all these, one could talk of literacy myth for enslaved people in the context of American slaveholding system.

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