The Black Novelist Before the Civil War (1)

Hisao KISHIMOTO

Nearly three millions of your fellow-citizens are prohibited by law and public opinion (which in this country is stronger than law) from reading the Book of Life. Your intellect has been destroyed as much as possible, and every ray of light they have attempted to shut out from your minds. The oppressors themselves have become involved in the ruin. They have become weak, sensual, and rapacious — they have cursed you — they have cursed themselves — they have cursed the earth which they have trod. (1)

Henry Highland Garnet

Although the American Flag has long symbolized the freedom and equality of all men, ironically, the “Land of the Free” was once a perpetrator of slavery. After the first slave ship anchored in James Town in 1619, the system of slavery was legalized in many states, beginning with Massachusetts (1641) and then Connecticut (1650), Virginia (1661) and New York (1665), etc.

The monster named “Slavery” deprived black people of all human rights and forced them to endure deplorable conditions. This dehumanization of black people was encouraged by the success of the tobacco culture which began in 1612 in Virginia and later by the cotton industry, especially in the Southern states which had an agricultural economy. In order to keep their plantations flourishing, white plantation owners employed every kind of instrument of torture — iron collar, hobble, handcuffs, thumbscrew, cowhide, whip, chain, gag and yoke — to keep slaves in a state of submission. The black people in the United States did not come to “the promised land” of their own volition, and accounts of those who came from the Slave Coast to New World are horrific.

The deprivation of all human rights inevitably put black people far behind in the development of their literature and art. Black people were actually prohibited from learning. After the American Revolution the black people, not so many, who participated the war on the revolutionary side, were freed, but there were numerous obstacles which still stood in the way of their learning. The education of black people mainly depended on their personal efforts.

Some were fortunate enough to be born free or to find a master sympathetic with their need for learning. Thus, black literature slowly began to take form. Before the Civil War, Jupiter Hammon (1718? -1806?) (2), the slave of Henry Lloyd of Long Island, published the first black poems and essays. They aroused the creativity of the first poetess, Phillis Wheatley (1753? -1784), another poet, George Moses Horton (1797? -1883?), and a slave narrator, Quaada Equid alias Gustavus Vassa (1745-1797), amongst others. However, the first black novelist did not appear until ten years prior to the Civil War.

From the beginning of the Nineteenth Century becons for freedom were lit one after another. In 1800 the first slave insurrection was led by Gabriel Prossor, a white slave; there was a rebellion of hundred of slaves led by Charles in New Orleans (1811), a revolt led by George Boxley in Virginia (1816); Denmark Vessey’s Plot (1822) in Charleston; and Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Virginia (1831), the most well-known revolt, etc.
Naturally, white plantation owners in the South who felt intensive uneasiness made more severe laws to prevent such revolts. Consequently, the organization of abolition moved from the South to the North. Frederick Douglass's main stage was in the North and William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* was founded in Boston. As might be imagined, the flower of literature did not blossom in the South, but rather, in the North.


Before the Civil War novel writing was not profitable, and novelists usually wrote only one work because their main activities were not writing novels, but rather, abolishing slavery. Their novels were devoted to that purpose. These early novels are weak in characterization and in style; however, even a century later readers can relate to the powerful emotions of struggle and confession. These novels are also important because they served models for novels of the 1890’s.

William Wells Brown: The First Black Novelist

I. Career

William Wells Brown (1814–1884) was the first black novelist, playwright, travel essayist and historian. His writings are mainly based on his various experiences during the period when he was a slave. He was born in 1814 near Lexington, Kentucky, as the slave of his master’s relative. His mother had seven children, each of whom had a different father. According to rumor, Brown’s mother was the daughter of Daniel Boone, a famous pioneer of Kentucky.

In his early life, unlike other slaves who were generally field hands on plantations, Brown was fortunate enough to become a house servant as a playmate of a young master. His mother was not so fortunate, however. One morning his mother was late for her work in the field, and thus, severely punished. In his autobiography, *Narrative of William Wells Brown; a Fugitive Slave* he relates the incident:

"Oh! pray — Oh! pray" — these are generally the words of slaves when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any farther. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears. It was not yet daylight. (3)
When Brown was almost fifteen years old, his master hired him out to another master. He then worked as a servant in a hotel, as a steward on the steamship Missouri, as an errand boy of Elijah J. Lovejoy, the publisher of *St. Louis Times* who was an abolitionist sympathizer, as a waiter on board the steamboat Enterprise, and as a field hand on a plantation. He then was sold to Mr. Walker, a slave dealer. Working for the slave trade he witnessed such wretched scenes as chained slaves, slavepens, auctions, tortures and killings, and the pitiful departure of slave mothers and children. As a result, he attempted to escape from slavery with his mother. However a few days after they ran away they were caught by slave hunters and sent back to St. Louis where they had to part with each other forever.

On January 1, 1834 Brown again tried to escape. Despite numerous difficulties such as starvation and cold, he managed to escape with the help of a Quaker family. The kind Quakers even went so far as to give him some money, some cloth and their name, Welles Brown. After staying awhile at their house, he left for Cleveland, Ohio, on the bank of Lake Erie, from where he would travel the underground railroad to Canada.

In Cleveland he found a job as a waiter for twelve dollars a month. The first day he made twenty-five cents, fifteen cents of which he spent for a spelling book. With ten cents he bought some sticks of sugar candy so he could pay a school boy to teach him spelling. He always carried a piece of chalk in his pocket so he could practice his spelling on a board fence.\(^4\)

Brown bought an arithmetic and a grammar book and studied them hard on his own. It was a start for his new life. He met Miss Betsey Schooner, a free colored woman in the summer of 1834 and married her soon after. And then he took a job on a Lake Erie steamboat, and during next nine years he helped sixty-nine fugitives across Lake Erie to Canada. From 1843 on his house served as the home of anti-slavery agents and lecturers. In the autumn of 1843, he was invited by the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society to be a lecturer. During this busy time he was beset by obstacles. He divorced his wife because of her relationship with his friend, James Garret, and he left New York with his little daughters to settle in Boston to labor for the cause of the American Anti-Slavery Society as an agent of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

In 1848 he was invited to England by English abolitionists. His autobiography, *Narrative of William Wells Brown*, had been well received and was widely read. In 1849, he went to Paris to attend the Peace Congress as a delegate of the American Peace Society. In Paris he was warmly welcomed by Victor Hugo and was invited a party given by M. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs. He was unable to return to the United States because in 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in Congress. If he returned the United States, he would have to become a slave again. Until he was able to purchase his freedom in 1854, he could not go back home. During his five-year stay in England he supported himself and his daughters by contributing articles to the British press, lecturing on American slavery and writing his book. In 1852, he published *Three Years in Europe* and in 1853, the first black novel, *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter*. The year before, Mrs. Stowe's famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had been published and had stimulated interest in slavery.

In 1854 he returned to America where he again worked as a black abolitionist in Boston. In 1858 he wrote the first black play, *The Escape; or A Leap for Freedom*; in 1862, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievement*, which is the first black history by a black man; in 1867, *The Negro in the American Rebellion*; in 1873, *The Rising Son; or the Antecedents*
and Advancement of Colored Race; and in 1880, his last work, My Southern Home.

His novel, Miraelda; or, the Beautiful Quadroon: A Romance of American Slavery Founded on Fact, a serial in the Weekly Anglo-African (1860–1861); Ciotelle: A Tale of the Southern States (1864); and Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine: A Tale of the Southern States are all essentially repetition of his first novel, Ciotel, or, the President's Daughter (1853). The name of heroines and the name of places were changed, but the stories hardly were at all.

II. A Note About the Truth of Clotel

About the identity of Clotel, rumored to be Thomas Jefferson's daughter, there were various opinions. Whether Clotel was Jefferson's daughter or not does not directly effect criticism of the novel, however. Recently Alex Haley, the author of Roots (1976), was criticized by an English reporter for not sticking to fact. Such kinds of problems often arouse controversy or sensationalism.

Robert A. Bone said in the Negro Novel in America (1958) the “the intended irony depended upon Brown's alligation that Clotel was the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Jefferson." (5) (the italics are mine and the same shall apply hereafter). Arthur Davis' introduction claims that Brown exploited "the well-known rumor that one of Jefferson's slave daughters had been sold at auction for $1,000." (6) The author of The Intricate Knot (1971), Jean Yellin, stated that "guaranteeing its sensationalism by making use of the Jefferson scandal he entitled his book Clotel, or, the President's Daughter." (7) Roger Whitlaw said in his Black American Literature (1973) that "the first and most important version Clotel, is based upon the legend of Thomas Jefferson's quadroon children..." (8) With the exception of Robert A. Bone, all these critics admit something suspicious about Jefferson, making reference to rumor, scandal, and legend. As Robert A. Bone pointed out, William W. Brown might have intended this irony. W. Edward Farrison, the author of William Wells Brown: Author and Reformer (1969), researched the truth of Jefferson's daughter. In 1954 he contributed an article to Phylon entitled "The Origin of Brown's Clotel".

According to his research, the first author of the rumor was "James Thomson Callender (1758–1831), a sometimes protégé and later a political enemy of Jefferson", (9), who insisted in the Virginia Recorder of September 1, 1802 that "for some time Jefferson had been keeping a slave mistress named Sally at Monticello, that he had once taken her with daughter to France, and that she had born him several children". At the beginning of his article, W. Edward Farrison used Jefferson's plantation record, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, which mentions the name, Sally, who was supposed to be the mother of Clotel. In order to fix the evidence, he used William Cullen Bryant's poem, The Embargo, Or Sketches of the Times: A Satirr (1808), the reminiscences of Jefferson's overseer, Captain Edmund Bacon, etc.. One incriminating account said:

In September, 1948, in their modest home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I talked length with three sisters who were obviously far from being full-blooded Negroes, each of whom was more that sixty-five years of age, and who traced their lineage directly to Sally Hemings through her daughter Harriet, who was born in May, 1801, and whose father those sisters had been told was Thomas Jefferson. (10)
I dare say that in spite of his effort it was not demonstrated sufficiently that Harriet was Jefferson’s daughter because his research could not present the persuasive materials to attest to the relation between Jefferson and Harriet. However, his research was not in vain because, in a sense, he made it clear that a slave holder in the Southern aristocracy, even if he was noble, could easily commit such a transgression. In this respect William Wells Brown treated a unique theme. Robert A. Bone said:

The historical origins of the Negro middle class can be traced back to the nocturnal escapades of countless male aristocrats who tried valiantly to wash a whole race whiter than snow. When “Massa” had an illegitimate child by a Negro slave woman, his attitude toward his offspring was often ambivalent. On the one hand, he desired a better destiny for his child than the cotton patch and the overseer’s lash. On the other, manumission was often legally impossible, and in any case it constituted too public an acknowledgement. Above all, it created a free colored population whose very existence threatened the institution of slavery.\(^\text{[1]}\)

III. Clotel

In Clotel, Thomas Jefferson’s daughter, a beautiful mulatto or quadroon is sold at a slave auction after the death of the president. The plot reveals that Thomas Jefferson, the president of the United States and the famous author of the Declaration of Independence, once had a black mistress who bore him two daughters, Clotel and Althesa.

Clotel was sold for fifteen hundred dollars to Horatio Green who engaged in politics and became a mistress of her new master. They loved each other; however, Horatio had ambition to be a statesman so he married a wealthy white woman. Clotel had already had a daughter by Horatio and so Horatio’s wife and her father demanded that Clotel and her child should be sold and sent out of the state. She went to live at a new master’s home where there was a another servant, whose name was William who helped her. They successfully escaped to Cincinnati. There they separated and Clotel prepared to start in search of her child. She arrived in Richmond just after Nat Turner’s insurrection. Her ruse was exposed when she was examined by watchful slave owners who searched all strangers, and she was arrested. By order of her master, Clotel was removed from Richmond and placed in a prison in the District of Columbia. She escaped from prison, and just when the way seemed clear, she was attacked on both sides on the “Long Bridge” leading to Virginia. Since escape was impossible she jumped off the bridge into the deep foamy waters of the Potomac. The last scene ends happily, however when Mary, the daughter of Clotel, and George, Marry’s lover who escaped from slavery with Mary’s help, meet in Paris.

The main plot of Clotel is not very complicated; however, William Wells Brown interjects many subplots. For example, there is the narrative of the life and escape of the author; the story of Georgiana who set her slaves free; the story of Clotel’s sister, Althesa; and many poems, etc.. As a result, the novel becomes clumsy. It is apparent that it was written as propaganda for abolitionism. In using a variety of poorly organized facts and experiences, Brown creates confusion. (Brown’s Narrative of William Wells Brown and Three Years in Europe contain many stories similar to those
in Clotel). However, in spite of its many faults Clotel is still valuable because it contain so much information about slave life. The novel concludes:

My narrative has now come to close. I may be asked, and no doubt shall, are the various incidents and scenes related founded in truth? I answer, Yes, I have personally participated in many of those scenes. Some of the narratives I have derived from other sources; many from the lips of those who, like myself, have run away from the land of bondage. Having been for nearly nine years employed on Lake Erie, I had many opportunities for helping the escape of fugitives, who, in return for the assistance they received, made me the depositary of their sufferings and wrongs. Of their relation I have made free use. To Mrs. Child, of New York, I am indebted for part of a short story. American Abolitionist Journals are another source from where some of the characters appearing in my narrative are taken. All these combined have made up my story.12

IV. The Denunciation of the American Democracy And Christianity

As far as the denunciation of the American democracy is concerned, the sub-title of Clotel, or The President’s Daughter, challenges the concept of American democracy. Thomas Jefferson is famous for his role as one of the Fathers of Independence. Furthermore, as the third president he had more progressive ideas about slavery than George Washington. He gave freedom to ninety percent of his slaves. William Wells Brown in Clotel, or the President’s Daughter severely denounced the democracy of America. In the first place, the existence of slavery itself is ironic in the country of “freedom and opportunity”. William Wells Brown, a fugitive slave had a correct understanding of the reality of democracy through his experiences and efforts. He pointed out the ironical beginnings of freedom and slavery:

Ah! it is the first cargo of slaves on their way to Jamestown, Virginia. Behold the May-flower anchored at Plymouth Rock, the slaveship in James River. Each a parent, one of the prosperous, labour-honoring, law-sustaining institutions of the North; the other the mother of slavery, idleness, lynchlaw, ignorance, unpaid labour, poverty, and duelling, desposition, the ceaseless swing of the whip, and the peculiar institution of the South. Those ships are the representation of good and evil in the New World, even to our day. When shall one of those parallel lines come to an end?13

He continues:

The origin of American slavery is not lost in the obscurity of by-gone ages. It is a plain historical fact, that it owes its birth to the African slave trade, now pronounced by every civilized community the greatest crime ever perpetrated against humanity. Of all causes intended to benefit mankind, the abolition of chattel slavery must necessarily be placed amongst the first, and the negro hail with joy every new advocate that
appears in his cause. 

In order to show the true attitude toward slavery, William Wells Brown developed Gorgiana, his favorite character, whom he made a model of the true democratic white woman. However, unfortunately his effort resulted in sterility despite the space and effort he gave to depict her; he only succeeded in producing discontinuity in the novel.

Having worked for the Anti-Slavery Association in New York and Boston for a long time, Brown knew the conditions there well, and thus, his vendetta against slavery extended to the North as well:

True, the Free States are equally bound with the Slave States to suppress any insurrectionary movement that may take place among the slaves. The Northern freeman are bound by their constitutional obligations to aide the slaveholder in keeping his slaves their chains. Yet there are, at the time we write, four millions of bond slaves in the United States.

The South was the mother of slavery and the North was the father of segregation. Although the North was a little bit better than the South, but neither can escape from accusation. Christianity, especially, helped promote the system of slavery. Ironically, America who had sought refuse from religious discrimination in Europe repeated the same great mistake in the New World. Christianity, an “opiate of the masses” kept black people enslaved. The following scene epitomizes this situation:

"Q. And, should his master be a Christian also, ought he not on that account specially to love and obey him? — A. ‘Yes.’

"Q. But suppose the master is hard to please, and threatens and punishes more than he ought, what is the servant to do? — A. ‘Do his best to please him.’

"Q. When the servant suffers **wrongfully** at the hands of his master, and, to please God, takes it patiently, will God reward him for it? — A. ‘Yes.’

"Q. Is it right for the servant to **run away**, or is it right to **harbor** a runaway? — A. ‘No!’

"Q. If a servant run away, what should be done with him? — A. ‘He should be caught and brought back.’

"Q. When he is brought back, what should be done with him? — A. ‘Whip him well.’

"Q. Why may not the white be slaves as well as the blacks? — A. ‘Because the Lord intended the negroes for slaves.’

"Q. Are they better calculated for servants than the whites? — A. ‘Yes, their hands are large, the skin thick and tough, and they can stand the sun better than the whites.’

"Q. Why should servants not complain when they are whipped? — A. ‘Because the Lord has commanded that they should be whipped.’

"Q. Where has He commanded it? — A. ‘He say, He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.’
“Q. Then is the master to blame for whipping his servant? — A. ‘Oh, no! he is only doing his duty as a Christian.’”

These questions and answers between a preacher and slaves clearly shows the role of Christianity in slavery. Christianity is intended for the people; however, once it becomes a means of oppressing people, especially in the South, it already looses its true mission. The theme of Christianity was treated ironically in many of William Wells Brown’s novels:

“I got no notion of dees white fokes, no how,” returned Aunt Dafney. “Dey all de time tellin’ dat de Lord made us for to work for dem, and I don’t believe a word of it.” “Marser Peck give dat sermon to Snyder, I know,” said Uncle Simon. “He jest de one for dat,” replied Sandy. “I think de people dat made de Bible was great fools,” said Ned. “Why?” Uncle Simon. “Cause dey made such a great big book and put nuttin’ in it, but servants obey yer masters.” “Oh, replied Uncle Simon,” thars more in de Bible den dat, only Snyder never reads any other part to us; I use to hear it read in Maryland, and thar was more den what Snyder lets us hear.”

William Wells Brown portrayed his favorite character, Georgiana, as a true Christian as well as an abolitionist. Georgiana awakened in Carlton, who sat listening to the sound of the gospel with perfect indifference and later became her husband, a love for the Lord Jesus Christ. She asserted her opinion about Christianity to Carlton and his father:

I’m afraid that the acts of the professed friends of Christianity in the South do more to spread infidelity than the writings of all the atheists which have ever been published. The infidel watches the religious world. He surveys the church, and, lo! thousands and tens of thousands of her accredited members actually hold slaves. Members ‘in good and regular standing,’ fellowshipped throughout Christendom except by a few anti-slavery churches generally despised as ultra and radical, reduce their fellow men to the condition of chattles, and by force keep them in that state of degradation. Bishops, ministers, elders, and deacons are engaged in this awful business, and do not consider their conduct as at all inconsistent with the precepts of either the Old or New Testaments. Moreover, those ministers and churches who do not themselves hold slaves, very generally defend the conduct of those who do, and accord to them a fair Christian, and in the way of business frequently take mortages and levy executions on the bodies of their fellow men, and in some cases of their fellow Christians.

Under the masquarade of democracy, in another words, Christianity, there was terrible slavery. That can’t ignored. In conclusion, Brown stated that members of church owned a lot of slaves. He denounced the Christianity and democracy of the United States:

... I invite the attention of my reader to the following statement, from which I leave them to draw their own conclusion: — “It is estimated that in the United States,
members of the Methodist church own 219,363 slaves; members of the Baptist church own 222,600 slaves; members of the Episcopalian church own 88,000 slaves, members of the Presbyterian church own 77,000 slaves; members of all other own 50,000 slaves; in all 660,563 slaves owned by members of the Christian church in this pious democratic republic!" 

Originally, a religion itself had a lofty aim to save people, at its dawn, however, as time progressed, the religion gradually departed from its main purpose and it often led to the road of corruption. Generally speaking, religions have a turning point where they become a religion on the side of people or become a corruptive religion which flatters power or authoritarianism. In Europe as well as America, regretfully, almost all religions fell into authoritarianism.

Many innocent people were sacrificed in the name of God. These religions became the only means by which one society could prove its superiority to other. Or it became a means by which a leader in a society could show his authority to his people. Pious Puritans came to the New World to seek freedom of faith and better life; however, they became self-righteous and forgot their mission.

As a first Negro novelist and abolitionist, William Wells Brown realized the corrupted nature of American democracy and Christianity. The value of Brown's novel was first recognized by the abolitionists of England, who published it. In America, the novel was published eleven years later (1864). For the American version, the symbolic and controversial title were changed and Brown did extensive editing. As the version changed, sentences were polished, but the originality was lost, and the strength of the novel's appeal to the public was diminished. Furthermore, the year of publication (1864) in the United States was not auspicious since the public was too busy to read. They were caught up in determining the new direction of the United States resulting from the Civil War. Moreover the novel itself had little attraction to readers because of its clumsy form.
NOTES
* Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882)  
He escaped from slavery in 1824 at the age of nine with his family. In 1843 he became a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Troy, New York, and in the same year he gave a speech entitled "On Address the Slave of the United States of America" at the National Negro Convention held in Buffalo, New York. His thought was too radical for black people at that time because he urged them to "rather die freemen than live to be slaves". In February 12, 1865, he delivered a famous sermon in the House of Representatives. In 1881 he returned to Africa where he died in the next year. In 1848 a collection of his lectures was published under the title "The Past and the Present Condition, and Destiny of the Colored Race".

(2) Most black slaves didn't know their date of birth, not even the year. In his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Douglass said that:
I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.


I marked up the fence for nearly a quarter of a mile trying to copy until I could write my name. Then I went on my chalking and, in fact, all board fence within a mile of where I lived were wathed over some kind of figures I made trying to learn how to write.


(10) W. Edward Farrison, ibid., pp. 353-354.

(11) Robert A. Bone, op. cit., p. 12.


(14) Clotel, ibid., p. 148.

(15) Clotel, ibid., p. 171.

(16) Clotel, ibid., p. 74.

(17) Clotel, ibid., p. 75.

(18) Clotel, ibid., p. 91.

(19) Clotel, ibid., p. 201.