

WHITE MEN AND MORAL ISSUES
IN STEVE McQUEEN'S *12 YEARS A SLAVE*

by
Saori YABE

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelors of Arts
in British and American Cultural Studies

at
Kansai University

Osaka, January 2018

Adviser: Professor Raphaël Lambert

White Men and Moral Issues in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*

Saori Yabe

“Life is dear to every living thing; the worm that crawls upon the ground will struggle for it.”

—Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*
(1853)

The life of a slave is not unlike that of a worm. The slave has to sacrifice an enormous amount of energy and time in order to reach what he is looking for. And even if he tries hard, he might never be able to get what he wants. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) is a film that records the life story of Solomon Northup, a free man of color living in New York City who is kidnapped and sold as a slave in Washington, D.C. During his twelve years of enslavement, Northup comes across three white men who behave toward him in very different ways. The first one, Samuel Bass, is an itinerant carpenter and abolitionist from Canada; the second one, William Ford, is Northup's benevolent first master and a devout Christian who preaches the gospel to his slaves; and the third one, Edwin Epps, is Northup's second master. Epps also uses the Holy Scriptures, but he does so not to convert but torment his slaves. Although these three men claim to live their lives according to the tenets of Christianity, their conception of what is right and wrong differs radically from one another. As the first part will show, Christianity is used to justify slavery despite the biblical argument of equality before God. In other words, being a Christian is not a guarantee of high moral standards. However, as the second part will show, those white men sense that there is a contradiction between what they do and what they feel deep down in their hearts, and *12 Years* succeeds in revealing the emptiness that comes from that contradiction.

Overall, this essay aims to demonstrate how those white men deal with their Christian values in the face of slavery and its immoral treatment of human beings.

Part 1. *12 Years a Slave* and the Value of Christianity

Religion is often a matter of interpretation, and while it may lead some individuals to improve themselves and do noble things, it may lead other individuals to abase themselves and do bad things. In Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, Christianity is described in opposite lights through three white men, Samuel Bass, William Ford, and Edwin Epps. While Bass sees Christianity as a bulwark against slavery, Ford and Epps use Christianity in order to justify slavery. The Holy Bible, on which most people relied in Antebellum America, can be used both to denounce and promote slavery. This part first explores references to slavery in the Bible, and then describes Bass's, Ford's, and Epps's understanding of Christianity.

When it comes to Christianity and slavery, a simple question comes up: does the Bible condone slavery? The answer is quite ambiguous since the Bible mentions the existence of slaves but also insists on equality before God. The confusion comes from the fact that the very notion of slavery in the Bible has little to do with what it was in the antebellum South. In the Bible, slavery refers to people who work for a master so that they will not die of starvation. Historically, such people were not forced to serve their masters but they did so voluntarily. Therefore, the Old Testament prohibits kidnapping and selling individuals. For instance, the Book of Exodus tells us that, "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death" (21.16). In addition, in the New Testament, there is a section called Philemon, which is about a letter written by Saint Paul to enjoin the slave master Philemon to treat his slave with respect. Thus, it can be inferred from this example that the Bible does not

allow “slavery,” which is characterized by abuse and extreme brutality. Conversely, there are some verses that approve of slavery and instruct slaves to serve and honor their master. For example, “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (Ephesians 6.5-6). As this verse shows, the New Testament asks slaves for their loyalty to their masters. To sum up, it can be said that, strictly speaking, Christianity allows slavery, but the relationship between masters and slaves referred to in the Bible is close to the relationship of masters and disciples. More importantly, slavery in the Bible is not based on skin color but social status. In fact, the Bible suggests that God strongly disapproves of racial segregation. For instance, Exodus tells that God caused some disasters on Egypt since Egyptians persecuted Israelis. Hence the apparent contradiction in the Bible: it rejects slavery based on race, but slavery *per se* is not categorically rejected. Therefore, the way people understand the Bible varies over time, from one culture to another, and even from one individual to another within the same culture. These various interpretations are exposed in *12 Years* through Bass, Ford, and Epps.

First of all, Samuel Bass is a Canadian carpenter who is hired temporarily by Edwin Epps. He is an outspoken abolitionist of slavery and plays an important role to help Northup. Bass does not mention Christianity clearly in this film, but he refers to the value of God in an argument with Edwin Epps. In the conversation with Epps, Bass criticizes slavery and asks Epps, “in the eyes of God, what is the difference” between black and white? Bass’s question may be linked to Galatians, which states that, “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3.28). In other words, Christianity does not allow any

discrimination and considers that everyone is equal in front of Jesus Christ. Thus, Bass is identifying Christianity as a faith that does not allow slavery. However, there is no clear evidence of Bass's Christian faith in this film. Rather, his opinion is reminiscent of the values of the Enlightenment. Actually, slavery was not illegal in the South at that time. For example, there was a law that said that, "[a] slave is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor: he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to the master" (*Louisiana Civic Code of 1825*). Therefore, technically, Epps is not breaking the law. However, Bass also tells Epps in their argument that, "Laws change, Epps. Universal Truths are constant. It is a fact, a plain and simple fact, that what is true and right is true and right for all. White and black alike." In Bass's mind, everyone has the same right, and the fact will never be changed. This is quite similar to the Declaration of Independence of 1776, which preamble starts with the following famous line: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Of course, the fact that the main drafter of the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson, was himself a slave owner, casts some doubt as to the sincerity of such words. Yet, this declaration is still regarded as the basis of what the United States of America stands for, and Bass shares these values. His indictment of slavery is obviously more rooted in such universal truths as those found in the Declaration than the laws found in the Christian texts.

Secondly, William Ford is both Northup's first master and a pastor. He treats his slaves with some concern. He is particularly kind to Northup, whom he saves from being lynched, and to whom he gives a violin as a reward. Ford's attitude suggests that he is a decent Christian in a cruel situation, and we easily forget the fact that he is a

slave master. And so, it is precisely this attitude that makes him a hypocrite. For example, he preaches a sermon to his slaves about those who commit offences, and quotes Luke: “It were better for him [who has committed an offence] that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones” (17.2). This means that it is better to sacrifice the offender for the sake of protecting others from harm. In the above Bible verse, the phrase “little ones” refers to a child, but it represents a slave in the story. This quotation is quite ironic because Ford does not follow this sermon. For instance, he separates Eliza, a female slave, from her daughter while hearing their piercing screams when he buys Northup and Eliza at an auction in New Orleans. Also, he decides to sell Northup to Epps when Northup fights against his assistant, John Tibeats, even though he knew that it would be very hard for Northup to work for Epps. In both scenes, Ford shows little mercy and ends up choosing what is best for himself, regardless of consequences for the people he hurts. Although he pretends to care about his slaves, he remains a slave master. The fact that he treats other human beings as property cannot be disputed. Therefore, he can be recognized as a hypocrite.

Speaking of hypocrisy, Ford’s wife must also be accounted for. She seems to care about her slaves but what she tells Elize, a female slave her husband has just acquired at an auction, is quite cold-hearted. She finds Elize crying and asks Ford why she is crying. He explains that he could not purchase her children along with her, which seems to spark her empathy: “Oh dear. Poor, poor woman.” But this heartfelt remark is immediately obliterated by a much more practical consideration: “Something to eat and some rest, your children will soon be forgotten.” Whether Mistress Ford shows a complete lack of sensitivity or is purposefully cruel is not clearly established, but it is hard to imagine that she would fail to understand what a mother in such dire

circumstances would feel like. Thus, it is obvious that Mistress Ford is making light of Elize's despair, and she does so because she has embraced the value system of the slave-owning class regardless of the moral issues it raises. Elize is, after all, a mere piece of property, and as such, her motherly feelings matter no more than the feelings of animals on the Ford plantation.

Finally, Edwin Epps is the worst slave owner Northup ever had because Epps treats his slaves like beasts of burden without any conscience. Moreover, the fact that makes Epps more immoral is that although he is as much a Christian as Bass and Ford are, he uses the Bible in order to justify his brutal behavior. For example, he preaches a sermon to his new slaves, and tells them, "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes" (Luke 12.47). The Bible approves beating a disloyal servant, actually, but he finishes his preach by saying, "That's scripture" without mentioning the rest of the verse. Luke finishes this stanza with this verse: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (12.48). Considering this verse, the punishment Epps refers to should happen only if there is a relationship based on trust. However, it is clear that there is no such a relationship between Epps and his slaves because what Epps has for his slaves is not trust but disdain. In short, Epps distorts the verse from the Bible so that it benefits him, and makes his slaves believe it. He uses the Bible as a mere tool so as to prove that he is right. Likewise, he blames his slaves for the bad harvest when his crops are damaged by an epidemic because he convinces himself that it happened because of impious slaves. While his deep faith in the Christian God is undeniable, he is committing a sin because he picks up lessons that suit his own convenience, and takes advantage of the Bible to justify his despicable behavior.

The above remarks help establish clear differences between Bass, Ford and Epps in terms of pro- and anti-slavery advocates, but as for the value of Christianity, it is complicated. Compared to Epps, Bass's way of thinking is based on the ideas of the Enlightenment whereas Epps's justification is based on Christianity. Ironically, the Enlightenment and Christianity have never coexisted very well because in the philosophical movement, which prospered in Europe during the eighteenth century, people doubted the existence of God and wanted to separate the church from the state. Also, Enlightenment philosophy insisted that liberty and equality were natural human rights, rather than rights bestowed on human beings by God. Therefore, the Enlightenment conflicted with Christianity since Christianity requires worshipers to show their loyalty to God while the Bible does not prohibit owning slaves. As mentioned earlier when discussing the antagonism between Bass and Epps, Bass is talking about the political principle and ethics by referring to the Declaration of Independence, whereas Epps is justifying slavery through Christianity. Religion can be considered as an ideology, but Bass makes his opinion stronger by referring to the Universal Truths of the Enlightenment. Actually, neither the Enlightenment nor Christianity constitutes a fact, and they could be considered as two opposite ideologies. But the Enlightenment is perhaps more grounded in experience than Christianity, which relies on belief. Also, the Enlightenment has a political message, as exemplified in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America. Bass and Epps's argument is showing disagreement between two of them but at the same time, it shows a conflict between justice and law, one is based on a moral point of view and constant, and the other is made to solve every problems and variable.

As for Ford, it can be said that his behavior is the most contradictory among those three characters. He does not use Christianity in order to justify his behavior like Epps

does. Also, considering that he is a pastor, he is more loyal to, and respectful of, Christianity than Bass and Epps are, and seems to have mercy for his slaves. However, it could be considered that the mercy is the reason why he justifies slavery. John Hope Franklin, a scholar of African-American history, said “pastors justified slavery since they believed that Christianity relieves the cruelty of slavery” (113) (my translation). According to Franklin, they believed that slavery follows the Holy Bible and is based on the revelation of God. Therefore, slavery has nothing to do with a sin; rather, it is a sin not to approve of slavery. Also, Ford is too weak to defend his slaves even if he must have been a merciful master compared to other slaveholders at the time. In either case, as a result, Ford betrays Northup and sells him to Epps. Although it is a decision that takes the safety of Northup into account, it is also for his own benefit: on the one hand, he has debts, and on the other hand, he is afraid of Northup’s excellence. In addition, he might have noticed that Northup is not a slave but a free man of color from the North, but he never brings it up out of sheer hypocrisy and also perhaps because he wants to avoid getting in trouble for owning a slave who is, in reality, legally free. At this point, it can be said that Bass is braver than Ford because Bass helped Northup at the risk of being caught and severely punished. Besides, in terms of betrayal, Ford is crueler than Epps because he has hurt Northup mentally. Since Northup has grown to trust Ford as a decent master, the fact of being sold to Epps must have hurt him very badly. In the end, Ford is a hypocrite and a coward, which is natural as a human being in a way, because he wants to live in good faith even though he has nothing more important than himself.

Speaking of Ford’s characteristic, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had pointed out a sin that is made by people like Ford in his speech. It is the injustice of silence: “History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not

the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people. Our generation will have to repent not only the words and acts of the children of darkness but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light” (Martin Luther King, Jr.). This address was made in 1965, during the Civil Rights movement, but we can apply this to slavery as well. Even in slavery, there were slave masters who were loyal to Christianity and had high moral standards as Ford does. In his address, King points out the helplessness of those people and encourages them to make a move. Ford could have been one of “the children of light” who breaks the silence. But he did not as he was torn between morality and self-protection.

Of these three men, Epps is the only one who takes advantage of Christianity. Epps, unlike Ford who preaches sermon to his slaves and does not force them to follow him, uses quotes from the Bible as a threat, and imposes his will on his slaves. In addition, he sometimes shows less respect for Christianity. For instance, he punishes Patsey, a female slave, because she has gone out on Sunday to get soap to wash herself; and she had done so because Mrs. Epps did not give her any. In the Bible, people are allowed to have a rest on Sunday, since it is the Sabbath, or day of God. If he was a decent Christian, he might have respected the Sabbath and let her go. However, he does not allow her to go and whips her brutally instead. At this point, he follows his selfishness rather than Christianity. Epps is also the last person who can relate to the idea of equality between whites and blacks. When Bass tells Epps about the guilt of slavery, Epps derides him. Bass asks Epps, “Now, in the sight of God, what is the difference, Epps, between a white man and a black one?” Northup records Epps’s response to this question in his narrative: ““All the difference in the world,” replied Epps. ‘You might as well ask what is the difference between a white man and a baboon. Now, I’ve seen one of them critters in Orleans that knowed just as much as any nigger I’ve got. You’d call

them feller citizens, I s'pose?"—and Epps indulged in a loud laugh at his own wit" (206). Comparing blacks to apes is, of course, a common and very racist way of dehumanizing them. Above all, Epps's arrogant attitude shows his confidence that this situation will last forever. This rude behavior seems to be making fun of not only Bass but also God since Bass is asking this question in the name of God. This exchange between Epps and Bass shows that although Epps is a Christian, he does not hesitate to distort Christianity to serve his own purpose, which, of course is absolutely immoral. It is perhaps a degree of morality that distinguishes Epps from Ford. Ford is also a slave owner but he, at least, understands that black are entitled to human rights, even if he does not let them enjoy many of these rights.

It is clear that Bass, Ford, and Epps are quite different although they are all Christian. Ultimately, the only point they have in common is Christianity. In other respects, each character shows several perspectives about slavery of this time. It is difficult to judge who is the most faithful Christian among Bass, Ford, and Epps because religion is in people's heart and the meaning of it is different depending on the person. However, it is clear that Christianity has played an important role in the history of slavery. As *12 Years a Slave* shows, Christianity can be used either as a tool to fight for the abolition of slavery or, on the contrary, to foster the development of slavery. Christianity is a key element of *12 Years* as it helps understand how white people negotiated the relationship between their faith and their involvement in the so-called "peculiar institution."

Part 2. Another Victim of Slavery

In Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, three whites characters, Samuel Bass, William Ford, and Edwin Epps, are described as archetypes of white Americans at this time. On

the one hand, Bass represents an abolitionist of the North; on the other hand, Ford and Epps show what slavery was like through different practices of slave-ownership in the South. However, if these three characters were coins, they would have heads and tails. Heads are their typical attitudes toward slavery; and tails are their concealed mindsets. As for Bass, his tail would be fear of punishment for helping Northup. Ford's tail would be being a hypocrite and cunning individual. Finally, Epps's tail would be his pang of conscience over slavery. Those tails are hidden and yet, they constitute important clues for understanding the confrontation between slavery and white American.

First of all, Bass's effort to help Northup is remarkable, and he clearly corresponds to the anti-slavery Northern white individual. His one goal is to do away with slavery. However, he would have been struggling with fear of punishment that might be caused by helping Northup. Actually, his fear about it is mentioned in the film. After Northup tells Bass that he is not a slave but a free man from the North, and asks him to write a letter to Northup's family, Bass says, "But what you ask of me, sir, scares me. And I must say, I am afraid. Not just for you, but for me." Bass's confession to Northup is telling us that white abolitionists, despite their empathy, good intentions, and strong motivations, were afraid of the possible costs of helping slaves. Furthermore, his last words, "but for me," are emphasizing two sides of the white abolitionist mind. One is their will to help slaves run away and make slavery illegal, and the other is their fear of retaliation, and instinct of self-preservation. In other words, they want slavery to end, but there are limits to how far they are ready to go in the name of their cause. The fear comes from the Fugitive Slave Acts, which Congress had passed in 1793 and 1850.¹ These laws were meant to prevent abolitionists from helping slaves, and help slavery continue in the South. They severely punished people who assisted fugitive slaves.

Although a lot of the Northern whites ignored this law and kept assisting slaves like Bass does, they would have been afraid of the punishment that their actions may have brought about. For example, white abolitionists who aided fugitive slaves were in danger of execution, especially after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had come into effect. In particular, people who assisted fugitive slaves in the South, either whites or blacks, could face death (Connors, 2008). Especially for Bass who, more than anyone else, makes much of freedom, losing his own freedom would be the last thing he would accept. The scare makes him attentive, as well. He disappears for a while after writing a letter for Northup so that he will not be found and punished. Also, even when Henry B. Northup, a white attorney who searched the whereabouts of Northup, finds Bass and asks him about Northup, Bass tries to keep it secret. The attorney Northup asks Bass, "Did you write a letter for a colored man at that place to some gentlemen in Saratoga Spring?" Bass answers, "Excuse me sir, if I say that is none of your business" (*Twelve Years*, 231). Although Bass tells that he is the one who wrote a letter later, he is quite suspicious about his surroundings. It must be a stressful to be doubtful even though he knows that giving a hand to Northup is what he should do. This tells us that morality is not enough to work on the abolition of slavery. Morality does not make a hero. People could be heroes if only they were prepared to lose their freedom.

As for the Southern slave owners, we can imagine two different types of tails in *12 Years*. First of all, William Ford, a pastor and the first slave owner of Northup, can be considered as a hypocrite since he is a decent and nice individual, but nonetheless a slave owner. Through this film, we can discuss Ford's hypocrisy from two perspectives. The first perspective is that it is convenient for Ford to control slaves if he pretends to be a decent person. For Northup, only Ford's kind attitude, which is completely different from others', is a hope that he could have had at this time, and a

sign that tells him that someone recognizes his talent. Therefore, Northup is motivated to work hard under the management of Ford. For instance, Northup proposes to make a route through a river so that they can transport trunks efficiently and cheaply, and he arranges for a team to build a boat for that very purpose. Although Northup's enthusiasm to work for his master may be due to the fact that he is pure and has not had much experience of slavery, he would not have shown such high motivation to his master if his master were cruel and immoral like Epps. Beside, it can be said that Northup is proud of his talent and fond of praise since the reason why Northup was kidnapped is an invitation for a concert as an excellent violin player. In short, Northup is feeling comfortable to work under Ford, who gives Northup special treatments. In addition, when it comes to the situation of Ford, Northup must be the easiest slave to control since he is loyal as long as he trusts his master. Historically, however, most slave masters controlled their slaves by threatening and harming them. By doing so, slaves were afraid of punishment from their masters, and kept working with keeping an eye on each other out of mutual fear to be betrayed. On the other hand, Ford is taking a different way of managing his business, which is a way of making slaves respect him. He might think that loyalty comes not from hatred but respect.

The second reason that makes Ford a hypocrite is that he is afraid of Northup. In other words, he is scared to be betrayed by rebellious slaves, especially Northup. Ford knows that Northup is a free man taken from the North, and that he has excellent knowledge and skills that are superior to many white individuals in the South. Therefore, Ford must have expected that Northup might cause trouble which might end up with a devastating result if he made Northup upset. Actually, the Southern white people were cautious about slaves' revolts. Nat Turner's rebellion², which took place in 1831, is the most famous event in the history of slave rebellions, and even today, Nat

Turner has gone down in history as a hero. Considering that the Turner rebellion occurred ten years before Northup is kidnapped, there is no doubt that most slave owners in the South had heard it. In short, it can be said that Ford tries to be nice to Northup in order to defend himself. He is a hypocrite, but it is not just because he is suffering from the pang of conscience. Rather, he is a hypocrite out of self-interest and self-defense.

Finally, Edwin Epps is a radical slave master, and it is doubtful that he is struggling with any pang of conscience over slavery. However, this film provides room for us to think that even Epps has a sense of guilt over slavery. It is described through the real intention of Armsby, an ex-plantation supervisor. In the film, he says “no man of conscience can take the lash to another human day in, day out without shredding at his own self.” Like Armsby argues, although it was quite common to whip slaves everyday as a plantation supervisor and never feel guilty about it, it was also true that there were some slave masters who had second thoughts about exploiting slaves and would eventually let them go free. Actually, there was an act to authorize the manumission of slaves in 1782 in Virginia. Those planters “freed their slaves by wills and other legal documents out of personal concern and care for the individual or from a pang of moral conscience” (Barfield 2013). In the case of Epps, he seldom shows such guilt except when he whips Patsey. In a scene in *12 Years*, there is almost 15 seconds until Epps orders Northup to whip Patsey instead of him. From when he stands behind Patsey and until he makes Northup whip her, he seems to hesitate to whip her by himself, and we can see a little his pang of conscience in his eyes. This 15 seconds’ hesitation might be caused by the kind of guilt Armsby is feeling, or by a special feeling for Patsey.

Patsey is Epps’s favorite “female” slave, and he is exploiting her for his sexual satisfaction. Abusing female slaves was not uncommon actually. For instance, Thomas

Thistlewood, a slave master in Jamaica since he arrived there in 1750, repeated sexual abuse of his female slaves. Moreover, Trevor Burnard, in *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*, argues that Thistlewood recorded 3,852 sexual acts with 138 different women during his 37 years in Jamaica. Reportedly, even Thomas Jefferson, who became the third president of the United States, had some children with his female slave, Sally Hemings. As for Epps, he considers his slaves his property and never recognizes them as full human beings. Therefore, a distinction of sex of his slaves would not be a big deal for Epps. However, Patsey is an exception. In Northup's narrative, she is identified as "the offspring of a 'Guinea nigger,' brought over to Cuba in a slave ship" (41). Northup adds, "She had a genial and pleasant temper, and was faithful and obedient. Naturally, she was a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence" (143). Her characteristics, such as a close ancestral tie to Africa, which is rare, her pure heart, and an excellent talent for cotton picking, make her exceptional. From those attractive characteristics, Epps would feel differently toward Patsey, and in the end, she became an outlet for Epps's sexual desire. Overall, it can be said that Patsey is Epps's favorite "female" slave. Hence, it is no wonder that Epps had scruples to give Patsey so many lashes because that means hurting his favorite property and making it broken.

Epps's violence and hesitation for it could be settled by referring to his sadism. Sadism is a mental disorder and people who suffer from it feel pleasure from others' pain whether it is physical pain or humiliation. Those sadistic people take great satisfaction in performing sadistic acts and enjoying their control over others. It is said that those symptoms often come from a trauma, such as an unfavorable experience during childhood. According to Theodore Millon, an American psychologist who is known for his work on personality disorder, Sadistic Personality Disorder (SPD) can be

categorized into four types: Enforcing Sadist, Explosive Sadist, Tyrannical Sadist, and Spineless Sadist. In those four types, Epps seems to belong to the Enforcing Sadist category, an attitude that often manifest itself in people, such as the police and prison overseers, who have the legal authority to control others. Enforcing sadists are unconsciously seeking out people who break their rules, and they inflict their worst punishments on those rule-breakers. By repeating those acts, they tend to consider those punishments as their obligation, and they do so in order to increase their ego. In the end, they are addicted to this satisfaction and lose control on their behavior. As we can see at the scene of Epps's whipping on Patsey, he seems to be losing his control and enjoying "playing" with her. Arguably, Epps is torn between two attitudes: as earlier mentioned, he hesitates to flog Patsey, but he is also driven by sadistic pleasure, which he fulfills by flogging Patsey.

Speaking of sadism, Mrs. Epps is also a sadist. She has an acute hatred of Patsey because, as mentioned before, Patsey is sexually abused by Epps who obviously prefers her to his wife. Mrs. Epps knows it but will not confront her husband about it. She is usually quiet and does not seem to be the type of individual who easily loses her temper. However, she prefers to abuse Patsey and is satisfied with hurting her. It might be the only way to give vent to her jealousy toward Patsey. Therefore, among the four types of SPD, she would belong to the Explosive Sadist category, which is a type of people who become violence unpredictably as they are disappointed or frustrated. In the film, Epps's control over Mrs. Epps is described. When she begs him to sell Patsey, Epps refuses to do so and threatens her to send her "[b]ack to that hog's trough" where he found her. And he adds: "Do not set yourself up against Patsey, my dear. Cause I will rid myself of you well before I do away with her." Although her cruel and hysterical behavior toward Patsey produces in the viewer a different type of fear from

the one produced by Epps's, her behavior can be understood since she is deserted by Epps and there is no one she can rely on. In short, it would be true that Epps and Mrs. Epps have personal disorder and that is one of the reasons why they are such cruel masters.

Epps's attitude also can be interpreted as the vicious circle of his vanity and sadistic pleasure in tormenting Patsey. In *12 Years*, McQueen provides us with the sense of Epps's vanity, which is caused by warped feeling of love for Patsey. Patsey is just a property for Epps; but she could also play a role as a concealed wife. Epps has special feelings for Patsey, which is similar to love, but he cannot love a slave in a conventional way. He is sadistic and his warped love would never be understood, that makes him feel vanity. The vanity also makes Epps have an extreme desire for exclusive possession for Patsey. However, his exclusive possession is betrayed when Patsey slips out of the plantation and visits Shaws, who is a plantation owner and Epps's neighbor. Patsey's behavior hurts Epps's pride badly, and causes him to become terribly jealous. Then, he tries to deal with his vanity by sadistic pleasure. After he takes away a lash from Northup and flogs Patsey brutally, he says, "Man does how he pleases with his property. At the moment, Platt, I'm of great pleasure." At this moment, his face expression is not altered but we can literally see his change from hesitation to pleasure. Overall, although Epps is a cruel and immoral slave master, it can be true that his brutal behavior is a result from the vanity or loneliness for being not understood by anyone. A tear that he shed unconsciously after he abused Patsey could be a proof of it and tells that he is mentally exhausted. Sadistic pleasure in tormenting Patsey is the only way to keep up his pride.

As argued so far, Epps has had a very ambivalent attitude towards Patsey. On the one hand, he hesitates to abuse her; but on the other hand, he indulges in sadistic

pleasure by punishing her. He sometimes gets depressed and sometimes petulant. Those behaviors suggest that he is suffering from bipolar disorder. According to National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), bipolar disorder is “a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.” The important aspect of bipolar disorder is repeating a mood in high (manic episodes) and down (depressive episodes) and that makes it differ from depression. During manic episodes, individuals who suffer from bipolar disorder have a lot of energy and feel as though they could do anything by themselves. They tend to keep talking and get distracted and restless. Also, they are likely to get querulous when the symptoms worsen. To the contrary, during depressive episodes, the same individuals have trouble sleeping and concentrating. As the symptoms worsen, they tend to think about death and suicide. Those patients are in danger of losing their social reputation, or even dying. Some doctors say that the cause of bipolar disorder is genetic inheritance but mostly, the symptoms for the disorder surface when patients experience a lot of stress.

Epps’s unstable behavior suggests that he may be suffering bipolar disorder. For instance, he forces his slaves to wake up and dance for him in the middle of the night and his behavior is very erratic. In particular, he loses his temper to the point of insanity when it comes to Patsey. Moreover, he seems to lack concentration when his wife interrupts the slaves’ dancing and insults him. When he rapes Patsey and when he whips her, he seems to feel depressed. From those attitudes, it is clear that his emotion changes a lot and his mental condition gets worse and worse as the story unfolds. His mental disorder may be due to the unconscious guilt he feels about slavery and the violence that goes with it, as the above-mentioned example of Armsby suggests. No matter how common slavery is, whipping and abusing humans are shocking to innocent

children, especially when they witness an act of violence for the first time. It could be a traumatic event that they may or may not get over later in life.

Alcohol dependence syndrome is yet another factor that makes Epps insane. Epps, from his first to last appearance in the film, is always drinking. Interestingly, bipolar disorder and alcohol dependence syndrome often occur together since patients of the disorder try to treat it by drinking. In their worst bouts of depression, such patients often use alcohol to fight off their illness. Armsby, an ex-plantation supervisor, tells Northup that he has used alcohol to get over the pain that he gets from abusing slaves. For those white men who supervise slaves, alcohol could be used as medicine: it may help them repent (at least secretly), or simply justify slavery.

Considering the absurdity and violence characterizing the peculiar institution, one may speculate that a lot of slave masters were mentally ill or at least consumed with guilt. Conversely, some masters were convinced that slaves eager to run away were mentally ill. This illness is known as Drapetomania, a conjectural mental illness that was hypothesized by Samuel A. Cartwright, a physician, in 1851. In Greek, Drapetes means “a runaway [slave]” and mania means “madness” or “obsession.” Cartwright supported slavery and argued that the reason why slaves tried to run away was because they were mentally ill, which was inherited genetically. In *Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race* (1851), Cartwright argues that the best way to control slaves is to treat them as if they were children. According to Cartwright: “If any one or more of them, at any time, are inclined to raise their heads to a level with their master or overseer, humanity and their own good requires that they should be punished until they fall into that submissive state which was intended for them to occupy” (qtd. in Caplan 35). Furthermore, Cartwright introduces two types of slave owners who are apt to lose their slaves. On the one hand,

those who made themselves too familiar with them, treating them as equals, and making little or no distinction in regard to color; and, on the other hand, those who treated them cruelly, denied them the common necessities of life, neglected to protect them against the abuses of others, or frightened them by a blustering manner of approach, when about to punish them for misdemeanors. (qtd. in Caplan 34)

Slaves who have been treated too well and too bad tend to be fugitive slaves, and if they are really apt to run away, Cartwright argues, then slave owners need to give them lashes so that the devil goes out of them. Needless to say, Cartwright's theory is bogus, but in the deeply religious and superstitious antebellum South, he had no difficulty to justify whipping as a treatment to exorcize the devil from slaves. In addition to Drapetomania, Cartwright describes another illness that he calls Dysaesthesia Aethiopica, a mental illness typifying African American individuals. Lazy African Americans, Cartwright argues, suffer from Dysaesthesia Aethiopica, a disease due to the color of skin. In order to be cured, Cartwright suggests, lazy slaves must be severely whipped and put to hard work in the sunshine. As these examples show, white people who supported slavery tried to find ways to justify their behavior and believed in the rightness of what they were participating in. It can be said that many white people were mentally depressed but no one noticed it since they were all in the same situation. When it comes to it, Epps's bipolar disorder may not have been a rare case among white masters.

To sum up, all three characters, Bass, Ford, and Epps, have unfamiliar factors, and those points are much more meaningful for understanding their struggle with slavery. Bass is considered as an ideal hero but he tells us that passion for the end of slavery is not enough with morality. Abolition of slavery is always shadowed by fear and high risk of punishment. Also, although Ford seems to be a decent slave master, he might pretend so intentionally. He would have cunning mind or fear. Finally, Epps is a cruel slave master but once you change the way you see him, he could be a weak and lonely

person who cannot face his brutal behavior and who is trying to forget his pang of conscience by replacing it with sadistic pleasure. They are struggling with the dilemma between pretense and the real intentions like coins that have heads and tails. White Americans were also victims of slavery.

Slavery is a sin: this is an undeniable universal truth in this century. But it was not so simple in Antebellum America, and Christianity was very divided about it, as it simultaneously condemned and fostered slavery. The ambiguous meaning and questionable interpretations of the Holy Scriptures have been disputed for a long time. Despite the vagueness and occasional incongruities of the Bible, people were very attached to it, perhaps because it made them feel safe because, like any other sacred book, it gave meaning to their world. The stories in the Bible and similar books can be easily distorted and help people justify some of their deeds, even when they know what they do is wrong. Throughout history, Christianity has proven to be very twisted, and as 250 years of slavery in America have shown, being a Christian has never been a guarantee of high moral standards. However, there must have been some slave masters who felt a pang of conscience. Whether they were good or bad masters, owning other human beings must have made them feel guilty, and it must have affected their life and the life of their families. The only ways to avoid guilt was to turn a blind eye and convince oneself that slavery is not a sin. And the whole culture of the Antebellum South did its utmost to normalize what was otherwise called the “peculiar institution.” It must have worked for many, and whether they dehumanized slaves directly or not, they may not have been aware that slavery is a crime. No doubt, the Biblical justification of slavery must have helped. This essay on Christianity and moral issues of white men in *12 Years a Slave* reveals the power of religious faith as well as the

deviousness of human beings. Without finding extenuating circumstances for those who were involved in slavery, this essay is a reminder that slavery was a tragedy not only for the slaves but also, to some extent, for slaveholders, the South, and the rest of the nation.

Notes

1. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 is a law that allowed local governments to capture and return fugitive slaves to their owners, and gives punishment on anyone who helped slaves' escape. The Fugitive Slave act of 1850 is harsher than that of 1793's. It was added further provision against runaway and penalty for interference in capture.
2. Nat Turner was a slave of Virginia. He set up a rebellion with his fellows and killed any white people they found. It is said that they killed almost 55 white persons in the end.

Works Cited

Print

- Barfield, Rodney. *America's Forgotten Caste: Free Blacks in Antebellum Virginia and North Carolina*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Xlibris Corporation, 2013. Print.
- Caplan, Arthur L. *Health, disease, and illness: concepts in medicine*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown U Press, 2009. Print.
- Franklin, John Hope. Honda, Sozo, trans. *Jinshu to Rekisi (Race and History)*. Tokyo. Iwanami Shoten, 1993. Print.
- Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Sue L. Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, eds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1968. Print.

Web

- An Early History—African American Mental Health. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2017.
- Collins, Sarah. "Sadistic Personality Disorder." *HxBenefit Health Information*. N.p., n.d. Visited 14 January 2017. Web.
- Connors, Tiffany. "How the Underground Railroad Worked." *HowStuffWorks*. N.p., Feb 29. 2008. Visited 14 January 2017. Web.

History.com Staff. "Fugitive Slave Acts." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 2009. Visited 14 November 2017. Web.

Mayo, Joe. "12 Years a Slave and the Ambivalent Role of Religion." *Resistance Renewal*. N.p., 2014. Visited 20 September 2017. Web.

Merritt, Jonathan. "12 Years a Slave Portrays Religion at Its Best and Worst." *Religion News Service*. N.p., 2013. Visited 10 September 2017. Web.

National Institutes of Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2017.

National Institutes of Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d. Web. 17 May 2017.

PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, n.d. 05 July 2017. Web.

"H-Net Reviews." *H-Net Reviews*. N.p., n.d. Visited 10 January 2017. Web.

"Loving the Enemy: Christianity and the Enlightenment." – *Opinion – ABC Religion & Ethics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)*. N.p., 2016. Visited 05 October 2016. Web.

"Luke 12 NASB." *Luke 12 NASB. BibleHub*. Visited Sept 6, 2016. Web.

"Luke 17 NASB." *Luke 17 NASB. BibleHub*. Visited Sept 7. 2016.

"Mary Epps." *Villains Wiki*. Visited Oct 8. 2016.

"21 Bible Verses about Everyone Is Equal." *What Does the Bible Say About Everyone Is Equal?* Visited Sept 20. 2016.

Film

McQueen, Steve. *12 Years a Slave*. GAGA. 2013.

Summary

本論文は、Steve McQueen の作品、*12 Years a Slave* (2013)を題材に、登場する3人の白人を比較し、キリスト教、そして道徳心という観点から奴隷制のあり方を考察するものである。この映画の主人公、Solomon Northup はニューヨークに住む自由黒人であったにも関わらず不当に誘拐され、その後12年間を奴隷として過ごすことになる。その奴隷生活の中で、Northup は奴隷制廃止論者であるカナダ人の Samuel Bass や、Northup の最初のマスターで、牧師の William Ford、極めて残虐な二人目のマスター、Edwin Epps という3人の白人と出会い、人生を大きく左右されていく。この白人たちはそれぞれ異なる立場・観点から奴隷制に向き合っていたことから、本論文では、その3人の白人を比較し、当時の奴隷制の闇を詳らかにしていく。

第1章では、キリスト教と奴隷制の関連性について考察する。宗教は、その解釈を巡って様々な論争が繰り広げられ、解釈の仕方によっては人々を正しい道、または誤った道へ導く要因にもなりうる。キリスト教も同様に、奴隷制を撤廃、または助長する要素として、*12 Years a Slave* では重要なキーポイントとなっている。Bass、Ford、Epps の3人は共にキリスト教徒であったにも関わらず、それぞれ異なる形で聖書の奴隷に対する教えを定義した。奴隷廃止論者である Bass は、キリスト教では人種差別による奴隷制は認められておらず、神の前では白人も黒人も皆平等であると唱える。それとは反対に、Ford と Epps は自らを正当化するために聖書を利用する。Ford はキリスト教の教えこそが奴隷の魂を救うものであると考え、Epps は命令に従わない奴隷が罰せられることは聖書にも認められた当然の報いであると主張するのである。特に Bass と Epps が奴隷制について論争する場面では、Bass が “All men are created equal” というアメリカ独立宣言の一節こそが普遍の真理であると、道徳心から成る「正義」を訴える一方で、Epps は、奴隷制は合法であるという「法」で真っ向から対立する。宗教は不確実かつその曖昧さゆえに、人々の都合の良いように捉えられてしまう。その結果、キリスト教は一方では奴隷制廃止を訴えるツールに、他方では奴隷制を促進するツールになっていたのである。

第2章では、奴隷制に関わる白人たちの本心に焦点を当て、その苦悩に迫る。Bass、Ford、Epps の3人は一見すると勇敢なアポリショニスト、敬虔で温厚なマスター、そして無慈悲かつ残酷なマスターであると言える。しかしその反面には人に見せない本心があった。Bass は Northup が自由黒人へ戻るきっかけとなる手紙を書いたキーパーソンであるが、当時は逃亡奴隷法という北部への逃亡を手助けした者は厳罰に処される法律があった。そのような環境下では、単なる道徳心や勇敢さは無力であり、周囲から裏切られる恐怖を抱え、自らの自由を失うという覚悟が求められたのである。また、Ford は奴隷に対し慈悲深い一面を見せ、一見温厚なマスターのように見える。しかし、その優しさは Northup をうまく手なづけるため、または Northup の能力を恐れたためとも言え、良心の呵責に苦しんだ結果というよりも、むしろ自己防衛の結果の偽善であった。彼は自らのために Northup を裏切る残酷さも併せ持っているのである。そして Epps は極めて残酷なマスターであるが、その反面、奴隷制が南部にもたらした悲劇を最も表す存在でもある。女奴隷 Patsey

への報われぬ想いや、彼のサディズムが生み出す虚無感と罪悪感、過剰なストレスが原因の双極性障害など、これらの要因が絡み合い、物語が進むにつれて Epps を取り巻く環境は悪化していく。しかし本人は自らが奴隷制によって蝕まれていくことに気づいていない。むしろ当時、黒人奴隷が逃亡を試みるのは Drapetomania という精神病のためであり、その病は遺伝的に受け継がれたものであるという全く医学的根拠のない噂が広まっていたように、奴隷制を正当化する動きが一般的であり、誰もそれによって自らの生活が崩壊していくことに気づくことはなかった。このように、奴隷制という社会的システムは、奴隷本人だけでなく知らぬ間に支配者やその家族を崩壊に巻き込むものであり、ある種、奴隷保有者たちも奴隷制の犠牲者と呼ぶことができるのである。