

“It is for Freedom that You Have Been Set Free”: Christianity, Minor Characters, and  
Conceptions of Freedom in Three Works by William Wells Brown: *Clotel; or, The President’s  
Daughter, The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, and His 1847 Narrative

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*But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."*

*Matthew 22:34-40, NIV*

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## Prologue: Varying Conceptions of Freedom From 1619 to 1863

In the preface to his 1849 *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, Henry Box Brown<sup>1</sup> (c. 1816-1897) offers the following comments about his life that speak to the history of slave writing up to the time of the publication of his *Narrative*:

The tale of my own sufferings is not one of great interest to those who delight to read of hair-breadth adventures, of tragic occurrences, and scenes of blood: —my life, even in slavery, has been in many respects comparatively comfortable... I freely admit I have enjoyed my full share of all those blessings which fall to the lot of a slave's existence... Had I never heard the name of liberty or seen the tyrant lift his cruel hand to smite my fellow and my friend, I might perhaps have dragged my chains in quietude to the grave, and have found a tomb in a slavery-polluted land; but thanks be to God I heard the glorious sound and felt its inspiring influence on my heart, and having satisfied myself of the value of freedom, I resolved to purchase it whatever should be its price. (1-2)

Box Brown's comfortable life in slavery was abnormal. Other slave narratives from the nineteenth century tell how slaves did not normally live lives of comfort, but instead lived in constant fear because their lives belonged to their masters who beat them relentlessly and separated their families to make a profit. These abnormalities in Box Brown's story cause him to fear that his audience would think his *Narrative* mundane, and subsequently find it unappealing and unimportant to the cause of abolition.

What stands out about this introduction to a slave narrative, where Box Brown effectively states that slavery may not be as bad as others have described it, is that he still believes his audience should listen to his story because of the inherent “value of freedom” that God puts on his heart (Brown, Henry 2). His *Narrative* is just as important to the abolitionist cause as

previous narratives where slaves sought freedom mainly because they were the objects of extreme physical brutality.

Therefore, according to Box Brown, abolitionists cannot simply seek to abolish slavery on the grounds that slaves are physically abused, because he was not abused. Their conceptions of freedom cannot be based solely around freedom from oppression because he was not oppressed. His *Narrative* introduces the idea that freedom goes deeper than abolishing slavery, suggesting that freedom is an abstract concept given by God that cannot be reduced to a lack of the brutality described in previous narratives. Box Brown deserves to be free as much as the next slave, even though his conception of freedom came from God, not his physical condition in slavery. His desire for freedom in his comfortable context implies that abolitionists should seek freedom for its own sake, before they seek the good that it brings.

This thesis explores in more depth the need for Box Brown's digression from other narratives by analyzing the ways in which William Wells Brown (c. 1814-1884) forms his conception of freedom in his early fiction and non-fiction. What sets Wells Brown apart from the authors of other slave narratives is that his conception of freedom as dependent upon Christianity is formed the background of his work. His writings argue that true freedom in society cannot be achieved without Christian conversion, enlightened Christian institutions, and individual moral reform by using the actions of minor characters, subplots, and subtle influences. While it is a common historical argument that reform movements such as abolition have Christian roots in the Second Great Awakening, because of the ways in which abolition in the United States split away from its Christian roots to become political and philosophical,<sup>2</sup> I make a distinction between moral reformers and Christian reformers. Wells Brown is a Christian reformer whose ideas for moral reform rely heavily on the Christian definition of love.

William Wells Brown is “the most prolific black writer of his century (Greenspan 5). He is most famous for writing *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853), the first novel by an African-American, but he also wrote the earliest African American travelogue, *Three Years in Europe* (1852), and several histories including his pioneering history of African-Americans, *The Black Man* (1863) and the first history of African-American military service, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867). Greenspan notes that “he wrote books nonstop to the day he died” (5). However, his books are all that we have of his life, as he “left behind no known personal archive—no family letters... no working books and papers, no library... just a few scraps of literary manuscript” (5). Even with his prolific writing, he is truly a minor character in history who, until recently, has vanished into the background of the white-washed antebellum South.

Despite his successful career as a writer, William Wells Brown has no concrete identity. He was “neither wholly black not wholly white, slave nor free, American nor English, creative nor professional” (Greenspan 1). His identity was so mixed, that he “often struggled to know how to take himself, to unify the wildly incongruous, disparate parts of his experience as he moved back and forth across the color line with a facility few others had” (2). This lack of a clear identity reveals itself in his writings, and leads Greenspan to conclude that “Brown—in all his names, personas, and fictionalized incarnations—has been a problem” (1). The fact that he cannot be pinned down on any issue has upset society to the point where he is still “a problem to audiences across the United States... the tens of thousands of people who [cannot] fathom the complexity or complexion of the man whose slyly humorous stories and understated homilies transfixed them” (1).

This thesis depends on the fact that Wells Brown was and still is a problem. His life and writings complicate any simple conceptions his readers may have about the antislavery

movement, the temperance movement, the role of government in their lives, and their understanding of the black identity. His conception of freedom as tied to Christian reform is problematic both for those who support slavery and those who oppose it on any other grounds. His ideological understanding of Christianity as a subtle influence is problematic for those who ostentatiously evangelize while promoting abolition. His lack of an identity is problematic for anyone who tries to put him in a box with other abolitionists, writers, and nineteenth-century African-Americans. He is, to put it simply, different.

Wells Brown was not the first influential writer to associate freedom for the slaves with Christian reform. When considering the early abolitionist movement around the world, one cannot overlook the Quakers who fought for emancipation in the British Empire. In the book *Quakers and Abolition* (2014), James Walvin and other authors explore how abolition in the British Empire moves to the United States in the late eighteenth century because of the direct influence of the Quakers. Walvin traces important American abolitionist writings to Quaker reformers, ultimately reaching the conclusion that the Quakers “were both the inspiration and the organizational platform without which popular abolition could not have thrived” in the British empire, let alone in the United States (166). Furthermore, the Quakers “began to seep across the country and addressed not merely the moral (and theological) outrages of the slave trade, but also confronted directly the economics of Britain’s involvement in slaving,” thereby being the first to argue that economic and legal institutions were morally corrupt, in much the same way that Brown argues this point in *Clotel* (171).

By the 1830’s the abolitionist movement in the United States shared this religious connection as many reformers viewed slavery as a moral issue that needed moral reconciliation (Stafford). Some of the most well-known Christian abolitionists included William



Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), who was the editor of *The Liberator*, founded the American Anti-Slavery Society, and “inspired two generations of [anti-slavery] activists” during his lifetime (Mayer xiii). However, the Christian cause for abolition suffered many setbacks in the United States before the midpoint of the nineteenth century. Unlike in the British Empire, abolition as moral reform did not have a religious and political leader such as William Wilberforce. Instead, one of the most influential abolitionists in the United States, Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895), developed an increasingly philosophical approach to solving the problem of slavery later in life (Buccola 2). To complicate this problem, Douglass’s Christian mentor, Garrison, was a known agitator who was unwilling to compromise with anyone on his pugilistic stances (Mayer xiv).

Even the Christian denominations themselves did not agree on how to deal with slavery as a moral issue, Stafford notes that there was a significant “battle for the churches” going on in the United States at this time:

Some churches accepted the abolitionist argument and did excommunicate (sic) slaveholders. More, however, felt that abolitionists were going too far. Abolitionists ended up disillusioned and disgusted by the church’s response, and some of them lost their faith. The churches, trying to keep peace at all costs, also failed: the largest denominations eventually split between North and South over slavery. (Stafford)

The Christian component of abolition further suffered because it opposed the prevailing social norm of Manifest Destiny, which assumed that the United States could do no wrong (Stafford). Because of these factors, the abolitionist movement in the United States slowly outgrew its Christian roots inherited from the Quakers in the British Empire. With these arguments and disagreements constantly shaping public opinion, it is no surprise that by the outbreak of the

Civil War, politicians like Abraham Lincoln were hesitant to bring Christianity into their arguments about freedom.

Despite this cultural shift, Wells Brown continues to argue that Christianity and freedom go together in his subplots and minor characters. Even with these arguments, however, his work has not received the kind of critical attention today that the “most pioneering and accomplished African American writer and cultural impresario of the nineteenth century” should receive (Greenspan, 2). This lack of recognition may be due to his style, which, while innovative, is often confusing. These three works are no exception to this idea. Whereas most African American authors requested established white authors to write their prefaces, Wells Brown retells his own narrative as an introduction to the heavily plagiarized and structurally complex *Clotel* in such a way that “history becomes autobiography” (2). Furthermore, his play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) was never meant to be performed on a stage, but instead added variety to his American Anti-Slavery Society lectures. Even his *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (1847) is shorter than most other narratives. Wells Brown also uncharacteristically lets his reader see his own imperfections. One example of many includes when he admits that he “deeply regretted” avoiding punishment by tricking another slave into receiving a beating for him (Brown, *Narrative* 399).

However, Wells Brown’s unusual quirks separate him from other authors. The critical oversight of how Wells Brown uses Christianity in his works may have occurred precisely because Christianity and Christian characters play only a minor role in his narrative and in the plots of his fiction. Nevertheless, even though Christianity is minor, Wells Brown includes it explicitly: Christianity drives the subplots of Brown’s works through conversion experiences of

the minor characters in *Clotel*, the role of God-ordained marriage in the minor characters in *The Escape*, and the subtle background influence of prayer in his *Narrative*.

Other early African-American authors reference Christianity and Christian institutions more directly and for different purposes. The different ways these authors speak about Christianity, whether directly in Box Brown's case, or only to criticize the southern slave holders in Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), validate Charles Heglar's observation that, "when [Frederick] Douglass is put aside as the standard for reading all slave narratives, exciting areas for new and further exploration are revealed" through an analysis of the differences between the narratives (Heglar 2). Wells Brown's relegation of Christianity to the background of his work is, in my opinion, the key difference between his writings and the other writings of nineteenth-century freed slaves who became authors. Even by comparing Box Brown and Frederick Douglass, one can see how the former argues that freedom has inherent value from God, while the latter argues that slavery should be abolished because it allows unspeakable brutality. Ultimately, how Wells Brown answers the question "what is freedom from slavery" in his early fiction and non-fiction writings should be as important as every other slave narrative author's answer.

Eric Foner, in his historically oriented discussion of American freedom aptly titled *The Story of American Freedom*, argues that freedom is not "a fixed category or predetermined concept" (xiv). Rather, it is "an 'essentially contested concept', one that by its very nature is the subject of disagreement" (xiv). Wells Brown's early works validate this view of the hegemonic nature of freedom from slavery. In these works, Wells Brown adds new layers to simple definitions of freedom at a time when citizens and politicians alike used the rhetoric of freedom prolifically. In the mid nineteenth century, Americans fought the Civil War to achieve "a new

birth of freedom”: the legal abolition of slavery (xiii). William Wells Brown’s literature defies the idea that this legal benchmark is sufficient for achieving freedom. More specifically, these works defy the notion that laws can influence culture, that legal shifts can change hearts and minds, and that freedom can be bestowed upon people by a man-made institution.

The following chapters demonstrate how Wells Brown’s conception of freedom in his works not only goes beyond legal reform, but is also dependent upon his conception of Christianity as a religion that can bring about social change. Wells Brown’s rebellion against the idea that freedom can be legislated is well documented. Judith Madera points out that Wells Brown was skeptical of “the entire political apparatus of the United States, including its electoral process” (223). This skepticism of political institutions led him to believe firmly in “the value of individual experiences to effect a moral revolution in the consciousness of his readers,” which explains why he often fictionalizes his own life story in *The Escape* and *Clotel*. (223).

Nevertheless, little has been said about his views on uniquely Christian reform. In Wells Brown’s literature, individual, uniquely Christian reform is a prerequisite to the moral reform required to fully purge society of the immorality of slavery. Therefore, taken together, his view of laws as broken and his assertion that morality is connected to Christianity means that society must completely adopt Christianity as he understands it to attain true freedom. This radical notion reveals Wells Brown’s ideological beliefs: conversion experiences, the way Christianity influences marriages, and the way prayer influences thoughts about freedom, are all subtle, even minor influences in one’s life. Therefore, abolitionists should not advocate for conversion and subsequent freedom with a loud voice like Box Brown’s, but instead softly in the background. The minoriness of his argument is as important as the argument itself. Through the minoriness of

Christianity in his works, Wells Brown provides his readers with an alternative, almost secret, blueprint for how to attain true freedom.

By the time William Wells Brown was writing these works, abolition as Christian reform in the United States had become a residual discourse left over from earlier conversations. Despite the shift from Christian reform to moral and political reform, the language of Christianity reappears continually in the background of Wells Brown's work. The first example of this discourse, discussed in Chapter One, is the role of Christian conversion experiences within the minor characters in *Clotel*, and how said conversions influence their actions and lead to true freedom for slaves. Chapter Two turns to Wells Brown's play, *The Escape*, and analyzes the role of God-ordained marriage in both creating the desire for freedom and sustaining that desire through the struggle for freedom. Finally, Chapter Three traces Wells Brown's prayers and references to Christianity in his own *Narrative* to show how the closer he is to God, the closer he is to freedom. Ultimately, Wells Brown's texts show that freedom is more than living in the North, being free from physical brutality, learning to read, or even changing the laws of the country so that no person can be legally enslaved. Freedom comes through Christian reform, and is perpetuated by conversion experiences, God-ordained marriage, and prayer.

Chapter 1: Freedom Through Conversion in *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter***The Immorality of Slavery**

Slavery is not only unjust— it also directly perpetuates immorality. So begins William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, the first novel published by an African American. Guilia Fabi, in her analysis of *Clotel*, states that on the first page of the novel, Wells Brown "points to the structural, endemic immorality fostered by slavery" (Fabi xii). He rudely awakens his audience to the fact that "society does not frown upon the man who sits with his mulatto child upon his knee, whilst its mother stands a slave behind his chair" (Brown, *Clotel* 43). Slavery, apart from the beating, rape, starvation, and torture emphasized in slave narratives at the time, also serves as a breeding ground for gross sexual immorality. The fact that "the real Negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population," Wells Brown's narrator asserts, "is, of itself, the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America" (43). Slavery creates sexual immorality in everyone, even the slave, by both directly causing and indirectly perpetuating said immorality as a cultural norm.

*Clotel*, brings this moral decay to light at every turn in the plot. From the beginning, the novel focuses on the observable fact that "the present system of chattel slavery in America undermines the entire social condition of man" (Brown *Clotel* 46). In fact, morality is such a prominent issue for Brown in the novel, that he avoids speaking about the physical brutality inflicted upon slaves altogether. Instead, he turns to emotional abuse, the value placed on human life, the breaking apart of families, forced marriages, broken promises, and unimaginable loss to argue that slavery should be abolished because it is immoral. This novel is not about the slave's

cause for freedom. Instead, Wells Brown undermines the institution of slavery on moral grounds, to the point where “the wise, the prudent, and the pious [will] withdraw their support from it, and leave it to its own fate” (4).

Wells Brown’s attack on slavery differs from other attacks leveled previously in autobiographical slave narratives, which focus on physical brutality. Wells Brown’s own narrative is no exception to this generalization. However, *Clotel* was written in an historical context that viewed freedom as a political issue that required the legal abolition of slavery, not moral reform. The novel’s emphasis on the immorality of slavery, when put beside the political nature of abolition, creates tension between moral reform and political reform. The abolitionist movement culminated in laws and constitutional amendments that ensured certain rights and freedoms to former slaves. Many Republicans, most notably Abraham Lincoln, promoted the view that freedom from oppression simply meant changing the laws. In his first major political address in 1837 to the Young Men’s Lyceum Convention in Springfield, Illinois, aptly titled “The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions,” Lincoln states that the best defense against the evils of society (i.e. slavery) that were raging in the United States is greater veneration of the Constitution: “The question recurs, ‘how shall we fortify against [evils inherent in society]?’ The answer is simple. Let every American... swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country” (Lincoln 5). According to Lincoln, the Constitution and the laws are the ultimate defense against all kinds of evil, including slavery. Therefore, politics, which is the process by which laws are created, should generate the reform that eradicates evil.

In contrast, Wells Brown suggests that freedom from slavery must begin with a moral change. He firmly believed in “the value of individual experiences to affect a moral revolution in

the consciousness of his readers” (Madera 223). One of the central ideas that appears throughout *Clotel* is that slavery has morally compromised both the North and the South. Therefore, the entire country has failed morally because it condones slavery. Broadly speaking, *Clotel’s* emphasis on the moral degradation of the country suggests that morality must first change politics, which can then affect the law and bring freedom from slavery. Therefore, in Wells Brown’s mind, abolition must begin with moral reform.

This chapter goes beyond the argument that *Clotel* expresses anti-government sentiments. I argue not only that *Clotel* is an extension of Wells Brown’s position on morality because of its overwhelming emphasis on moral degradation, but also that the minor characters and subplots promote an understanding of moral change that is tied to uniquely Christian conversion experiences. Wells Brown’s solution to the rampant moral decline highlighted in *Clotel* is gradual moral reform uniquely rooted in the Christian conversion experiences. For Wells Brown, freedom cannot be fully achieved through legal reform and depends upon a change in the hearts and minds of citizens of both the North and the South that can only be brought about by Christianity.

The first section of this chapter establishes the principles of minor character analysis used to establish the subplots within *Clotel*. The second section explores how the subplots in *Clotel* depend upon conversion experiences instead of legal reform, as Christian conversion influences the actions of the minor characters that either bring about freedom or perpetuate slavery. The remainder of this chapter is a detailed analysis of the actions of the plethora of minor characters in the story in light of these changes that occur. Even though, historically, slavery was abolished for political reasons, Wells Brown’s minor characters in *Clotel* suggest that a political solution not only leaves much to be desired in terms of freedom, but could also be detrimental to the



cause of freedom. Therefore, Wells Brown suggests Christian conversion is superior to political change and moral reform because it promotes a more complete equality after emancipation. Politically or morally motivated emancipation can only perpetuate incomplete freedom for enslaved African-Americans.

### **Nineteenth-Century Novels: The Minor Characters in *Clotel***

Within the plot of a work of fiction, “each moment magnifies some characters while turning away from—and thus diminishing or even stinting—others” (Woloch 12). *Clotel*, with its many characters and subplots, affirms this idea of a zero-sum collective system of characters. In establishing a theory for interpreting minor characters in his work *The One vs. The Many* (2003), Alex Woloch uses “the distribution of [the reader’s] attention within the narrative” to interpret minor characters as products of both the “referential elaboration of a character, as implied individual, and the emplacement of a character within a coordinated structure” (15). He finds that characters form their identities through a combination of direct references and playing roles within the structure of the novel. According to his argument, “literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference,” (17). Therefore, when developing accurate methods of analyzing character, considering the role a character plays, either individually or as part of a collective, is just as important as the direct characterization.

This mixed analytical method leads to the obvious conclusion that the protagonist in a novel is characterized directly more often than the minor characters who take up less space in the discourse. However, that does not mean that the minor characters are any less important, nor are they any less developed simply because they are not as psychologically developed or sympathetic as quasi-human agents. Characterization is a distribution of attention that “relies *on*

reference and takes place *through* structure (Woloch 17, original emphasis). Therefore, both are equally important to interpreting the significance of any character or group of minor characters in a novel where multiple characters are fighting for attention. Furthermore, in episodic fiction like *Clotel*, these effects are compounded; every time the main characters appear, they are characterized directly, while the minor characters repeatedly gain their identities through their roles in the structure.

The characters who receive the most attention in *Clotel*, both in the discourse and in the critical interpretations of the novel, are the eponymous Clotel and every member of her immediate family. No doubt due to the title of the novel, scholars who are not analyzing the sensationalist claim that Thomas Jefferson fathered slaves have focused on the “adventures and peregrinations of two generations of Jefferson’s all-but-white mullata offspring” (Fabi xii). However, in true nineteenth-century serialized style, *Clotel*, with its “proliferation of characters and situations... thrusts the reader into the enormous and intricate maze of the world of slavery” (xii). These characters that explode out of the first chapter, including Georgiana, Reverend Peck, Carlton, Horatio Green, Henry Morton, and even the Quakers, are all fighting for attention in the novel in their own unique sub-plots. The minor characters I analyze act within the Pecks’ sub-plot that branches off from Curren, Clotel’s mother. Georgiana, Carlton, and Reverend Peck are all slighted in the discourse that surrounds Clotel’s sufferings, as Woloch predicts they should be. However, they all speak to Wells Brown’s ideas of freedom as dependent on Christian conversion through the role they play as either liberators or perpetrators of slavery.

### **The Quest for Freedom: Legal Reform Versus Christian Conversion**

In order to show why these minor characters are liberators working for uniquely Christian moral reform, I describe here Wells Brown's personal views on the origins of freedom. Wells Brown viewed political institutions as inherently broken. In her newest book, *Black Atlas: Geography and Flow in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2015), Judith Madera explores the assertion that Wells Brown wrote *Clotel* as a direct response to the brokenness he saw in politics, specifically the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Madera points out that Wells Brown firmly believed the Fugitive Slave Act was the most horrendous piece of legislation in the history of the United States:

In *Three Years in Europe...* [Wells] Brown politicized the injunction, concluding that 'the Fugitive Slave Law has converted the entire country, North and South, into one vast hunting ground,' later portraying tracts of Mississippi in *Clotel* as just that: human hunting grounds. (32)

Wells Brown's use of the word "converted" is not incidental. The Fugitive Slave Act changed the entire country, as it could not have been passed without the approval of both North and South (33). With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, both the North and the South became complicit in perpetuating slavery, making neither one better than the other in Wells Brown's mind. Accordingly, Wells Brown was forced to publish *Clotel* abroad, as he was in England when the law passed, and therefore decided to stay for several more years, writing *Three Years in Europe* and finishing and publishing *Clotel* (33).

Upon returning to the United States, Wells Brown firmly denied that, "slavery was a regionally specific concern and not reflective of the nation as a whole" (Madera 33). Even though the novel takes place in the South, by including Northern characters who also participate in and perpetuate slavery, Wells Brown refuses to "atomize the South as the seedbed of the

slavery institution” (33). Instead, *Clotel* portrays slavery as a national issue, rooted in national sentiment and nationally encouraged immorality that cannot be fixed by laws because the laws created the problem. In Wells Brown’s mind, the alternative to mass legal reform is individual moral reform. Furthermore, in *Clotel*, he puts a uniquely Christian spin on this moral reform by using aspects of Puritan conversion narratives in the development of the roles of his minor characters.

Aside from the obvious allusions to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) in the characterization of Georgiana as an evangelist, Wells Brown also uses specific tropes of the American conversion narrative in Carlton’s conversion experience. Namely, Carlton’s character arc follows the four “cardinal points in William Perkin’s ten-stage morphology of conversion: the ‘preparatory’ stages... the ‘kindling’ of saving faith... the ‘assurance’ and persuasion of mercy... and the fourth... stage, in which ‘God gave a man grace to endeavor to obey his Commandments by a new obedience’” (Morgan 68-69, qtd. in Caldwell 127). There is an established literary relationship between early narratives that connects the slave narrative with the Puritan conversion narratives as noted by Heglar: “In colonial America, ‘narrative’ was applied to a variety of autobiographical accounts, which emphasized factuality, such as spiritual conversion, Indian captivity, and criminal confession” (Heglar 7). In this way, Wells Brown also draws upon the origins of slave narratives in his fiction through Carlton’s conversion experience.

Georgiana plays the initial role of preparing Carlton to become a Christian. After a conversation with Reverend Peck, where he defends slavery with the Bible by arguing that the Bible “is older than the Declaration of Independence” and should therefore be revered in the South, Carlton states his position: “I confess... that I am no great admirer of either the Bible or slavery” (Brown, *Clotel* 73-74). As the conversation ends, Georgiana, who “differed from both

the father and his visitor upon the subject which they had been discussing... gave it as her opinion that the Bible was both the bulwark of Christianity and liberty” (74). As Georgiana defends her position in the conversation that follows Carlton, “for the first time, views Christianity in its true light” as an institution that calls for the freedom of the slave (75).

Georgiana is instrumental in the second phase, kindling Carlton’s faith through their conversations. In short, “Georgiana’s first objective... was to awaken in Carlton’s breast a love for the Lord Jesus Christ” (Brown, *Clotel* 95). Throughout the rest of their relationship she accomplishes her aims, turning Carlton from a man who “sat under the sound of the gospel with perfect indifference” into a Christian who understands the true nature of freedom and can explain it articulately to the slaves (95). At the same time, she also protects him from her father. In one scene, Reverend Peck enters the room as Carlton leaves, and Georgiana presses one final request upon her father: “I hope...that in your future conversation with Mr. Carlton, on the subject of slavery, you will not speak of the Bible as sustaining it” (97). This act shows her dedication to seeing Carlton’s conversion through to the end, and indirectly represents Carlton’s own assurance that Christianity is true. He can, through God’s mercy, become a Christian who also supports liberty for all people.

Finally, Carlton carries on Georgiana’s legacy after her death in an act of new obedience where he finally realizes his new faith. He supports Georgiana in her decision to free her slaves with property in the North, as Georgiana states that “we have been urged to send you to Liberia, but we think it wrong to send you from your native land” (Brown, *Clotel* 158). After her death, Carlton, for the first time, regards the slaves as “God’s children” and continues his wife’s legacy as a Christian liberator (159). A view of Carlton as a character who engages in simple moral reform would be a gross understatement to the radical nature of what he does to create freedom

in the novel. His actions are shocking to say the least, and his views towards freedom change as a direct result of his conversion. Ultimately this dependence on conversion narratives highlights Christianity as reasons why *Clotel's* minor characters want to promote freedom. Freedom is more than changing law and even more than moral reform. Through these characters, Wells Brown argues that uniquely Christian reform is the best, possibly even the only way to create true freedom for the slave.

### **The Actions of *Clotel's* Minor Characters**

To begin the discussion about the role of Christianity in freedom, Wells Brown must first defend Christianity against the way the Southern slave holders used it to perpetuate “good” behavior in their slaves. The character of Georgiana creates this opportunity for a true conversation about how Christianity was used to both defend and attack the institution of slavery through her disagreements with other characters. The two most prevalent characters with opposing viewpoints are Georgiana and her father. He is “a native of the state of Connecticut where he was educated for the ministry, in the Methodist persuasion,” and a slaveholder who sees himself as a kind master who has not committed any crimes (Brown, *Clotel* 71). One of the first pieces of information Wells Brown reveals about Reverend Peck’s past is that he owns slaves not purposefully, but almost as a side effect of living in the South for too long. When he moves to the South, Southern society, with its rich parties and eloquence, “is too brilliant for him not to be captivated by it; and, as might have been expected, he succeeded in captivating a plantation with seventy slaves,” (71). Once he establishes himself as a plantation owner, Reverend Peck speaks about how Christianity fits neatly into the institution of slavery: “it is my wish that a new system be adopted on all the plantations in the estate... The gospel is calculated

to make mankind better, and none should be without it” (72). Later in the novel, Reverend Peck uses religious instruction “to make [his slaves] more trustworthy and valuable as property” (111). His goal is to give his slaves the gospel for his own benefit.

On the other hand, Georgiana believes that “the Bible [is] both the bulwark of Christianity and liberty” (Brown, *Clotel* 74). Her argument begins with the assumption that “to judge justly of the character of anything, we must know what it does. That which is good does good, and that which is evil does evil” (74). She also establishes that “God’s designs indicate his claims,” and therefore, since God is good, whatever promotes general human welfare is “according to the will of God, and is good... On the other hand, whatever in its proper tendency and general effect destroys, abridges, or renders insecure, human welfare, is opposed to God’s will, and is evil” (75). Georgiana’s argument differs from her father’s because the central point does not rely on quotations from the Bible, but instead, focuses on the character of God. She suggests only at the end of her argument that the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself... should cause [Christians] to have respect to the rights of the slave,” (75). Where Reverend Peck continually interprets specific verses in a certain way, Georgiana sees that the Biblical character of God and the institution of slavery in the United States are incompatible.

Both Georgiana and her father use highly stylized language in these arguments, which reinforces their identities as minor characters characterized by the roles they play within the structure of the novel. As Ernest points out, Wells Brown uses recognizable characters, tropes, and themes frequently in his works:

In Brown’s large body of work one encounters striking representations of a number of literary, cultural, and historical concerns that are now at the center of the scholarly stage, including blackface minstrelsy, passing, racial mixing, sentimental culture, various

modes of cultural memory, and narrative fragmentation and self-reflexivity.

(*Reconstruction* 1109)

The stylized language reinforces both Georgiana's easily recognizable identity as a true Christian who defends the Bible and her father's identity as an immoral slave holder who uses it for personal gain. As has been discussed, Wells Brown constantly engages in the debate over the role of Christianity within abolition. By making his minor characters more recognizable, Wells Brown appeals to his readers' basic understandings of the debate, thereby making his message in his subplot easily understandable and digestible.

Ultimately, the differences between Georgiana and her father come to a head over Carlton. As Carlton goes through the conversion process, the novel truly takes a stance on the importance of Christianity in the abolition debate. As shown by the fact that he supports freedom even though he has "spent too many hours over the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine to place that appreciation upon the Bible and its teachings that it demands," Carlton would have likely supported abolition on moral grounds not based in Christianity before his conversion (Brown, *Clotel* 74). After his conversion to Christianity, Carlton gradually becomes an ardent and effective abolitionist, helping Georgiana free her father's slaves. Furthermore, Carlton's conversion and marriage to Georgiana leads to his deeper care for the lives of the slaves. Through their marriage, Georgiana helps Carlton move "from the mere theory of liberty to practical freedom. [Carlton] had looked upon the Negro as an ill-treated distant link of the human family; he now regarded them as God's children" (159). Georgiana and Carlton create drastically different lives for Reverend Peck's slaves through Christian equality and love.

### **The Christian Liberators: Georgiana Peck and Carlton**



Georgiana is both the central Christian character in the novel and the most successful abolitionist. Aside from her actions, the titles of the chapters dedicated to her subplot ostentatiously affirm her as such. First, Chapter Ten is titled: “The Young Christian”. Here, Georgiana begins her relationship with Carlton and redeems Christianity from Reverend Peck’s perversion. Chapter Eighteen is titled “The Liberator”: it relates how Georgiana resolves to free her slaves after her father’s death. Finally, Chapter Twenty-one is titled “The Christian’s Death”: In this penultimate chapter, Georgiana dies of consumption and frees the slaves with Carlton’s help. These chapter titles illustrate what Wells Brown wants to emphasize within the limited discourse of the subplots; he wants his readers to think of Georgiana as both a true Christian and an exemplary liberator.

Georgiana’s actions as both a Christian and a liberator lead to ideal freedom. Her achievements begin when she develops empathy for the slaves after her father’s death. As she and Carlton are walking in the woods, they hear the slaves singing and rejoicing about the death of their master. Carlton, after hearing several verses where they sing “God send him on his way,” and, “For he’s gone where the slaveholders go,” decides that enough is enough and regrets that “he has caused [Georgiana] to remain and hear what to her must be anything but pleasant reflections upon her deceased parent” (Brown, *Clotel* 126-127). Georgiana, however, does not want to leave: “No... let’s hear them out. It is from these unguarded expressions of the feelings of the Negroes, that we should learn a lesson” (127). Georgiana wants a deeper human connection with the slaves because, on some level, she agrees with them and rebels against her father because he has held slaves. She could never not love her father, but she does feel the slaves’ pain in a tangible way that impacts her for the rest of the novel. Her compassion, which stems from her Christian love for everyone, enables Georgiana to be an effective liberator. She

knows that, no matter how humane a slave-owner may be, the institution of slavery will always cause pain for the slaves.

After she hears her father's slaves singing, Georgiana decides to go about freeing them in an unconventional manner. First, she resists the impulse to free them immediately because she recognizes that freedom from slavery will not mean freedom from oppression. Instead, she remedies the difficulties of immediate emancipation by deciding to give her slaves what they need "for the world to come" (Brown, *Clotel* 133). She thoughtfully notices that "if the slaves were liberated, they must be sent out of the state. This, of course, would incur additional expense; and if they left the state, where had they to go?" (134). Georgiana brings the reader back to "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" because her first thoughts are for the complete desire to provide equality of her slaves, not just their immediate freedom (134).

Also on the grounds of treating the slaves as she would like to be treated, Georgiana refuses to send them back to Africa. She asks:

Is this not their native land? What right have we, more than the negro, to the soil here, or to style ourselves native Americans? Indeed, it is as much their home as ours, and I have sometimes thought it was more theirs. The Negro has cleared up the lands, built the towns, and enriched the soil with his blood and tears; and in return, he is to be sent to a country of which he knows nothing. (Brown, *Clotel* 134)

Georgiana knows that, in order to satisfy her love for her slaves, which is built on empathy and the Christian doctrine of loving your neighbor, she can neither free her slaves immediately nor send them back to Africa. Instead, she must give them full freedom and equality in the United States.

With her strong beliefs, Georgiana decides to free her slaves with “a system of gradual emancipation... to prepare the negro for freedom” (Brown, *Clotel* 136). She and Carlton begin by getting rid of the whip, which immediately changes everything on the Poplar Farm. The elimination of violence as an incentive to work undermines one of the chief immoral and hypocritical evils of slavery: unrestrained brutality. Second, they institute a system of payment, stating that the slaves are “allowed a certain sum for every bale of cotton produced” (136). Payment gives value to the work of the slave, which enhances their self-esteem and tangible equality relative to white people. Third, the slaves “understand that the money earned by them would be placed to their credit, and when it amounted to a certain sum, they should all be free” (136). Since freedom is the ultimate, guaranteed goal, it justifies everything the Georgiana and Carlton are doing. Furthermore, they both openly agree to give their slaves freedom upon the fulfillment of specific, measurable conditions, not vague promises that can easily be taken back if circumstances change.

Once Georgiana and Carlton put these policies in place, there is immediate “change amongst all these people” who went from being treated as machines that could be abused to being treated as human beings capable of doing valuable work and earning their freedom (Brown, *Clotel* 136). Here, Wells Brown uses the word “people” to describe the brick-layers as opposed to “slaves” or “negroes.” This word change also occurs with Carlton. When a neighbor asks him “What kind of people are [his slaves]” that they work so diligently, he replies, “I suppose... that they are like other people, flesh and blood” (137). Paradoxically, through purposeful, delayed emancipation, Georgiana and Carlton bring about complete equality for their slaves by viewing them as people, valuing their work, raising them out of oppression, and recognizing that freedom is a natural right given by God, not something they choose to give.

Upon her deathbed, Georgiana makes her wish for the complete freedom of her slaves abundantly clear by telling them what they need to move on from the plantation to true freedom: a high moral standard, education, and property. After all the slaves are “summoned before the noble woman and informed that they [are] no longer bondsmen,” Georgiana gives three exhortations (Brown, *Clotel* 157). First, she tells the slaves to be pious: “Make the Lord Jesus Christ your refuge and exemplar. His is the only standard around which you can successfully rally” (157). She believes that being united under Christianity is the only way to achieve the high standard the outside world will put on them. Next, she encourages the freed slaves to “get as much education as possible for [themselves] and [their] children... [they] can never be truly free until [they] are intelligent” (157-158). This quotation shows just how much Georgiana truly cares for the freed slaves. Finally, she gives them the ultimate social equalizer: property in the free states. By giving property to her freed slaves, Georgiana does everything that she can, ending her speech with “I hope you will all prosper” (158).

Georgiana’s willingness to emancipate her slaves on her death bed is not a feeble attempt to save herself from the guilt of having slaves, as it might be in other contexts. To the contrary, she is fulfilling her commitment to true freedom formed by her Christian values to the best of her ability. Since her actions leading up to her death demonstrate her unusual commitment to true freedom for her slaves, we can assume that she and Carlton would have followed through on their promises. In fact, this scene confirms that she would have been faithful if she had continued living, as the encouragements she gives come from her heart and are founded on the unmistakably Christian belief that she should treat everyone, even her slaves, as she wants to be treated. On her deathbed, she not only frees her father’s slaves politically but also frees them socially to ensure that they are not oppressed in the future.

### **The Passive Northerner: Henry Morton**

For every Christian character in *Clotel*, there is also a corresponding character who perpetuates slavery through his secular thoughts and actions. Henry Morton, the husband of Althesia and a northerner from Vermont, perpetuates slavery, not as some do through false interpretations of Christianity but by ignoring religion altogether. His passivity reinforces the existing immoral institution of slavery. As Althesia's husband, Morton tries to purchase her mother, Curer, out of slavery, and the two of them "resolved not to hold slaves, or rather not to own any" (Brown, *Clotel* 116). However, he "does not publicly advocate the abolition of slavery" but instead, simply "makes himself obnoxious to private circles, owing to the denunciatory manner in which he condemns the 'peculiar institution'" (151). As his character develops, Morton simply talks about the positive aspects of the abolitionist movement, and fails to be fully committed to viewing slavery as immoral and evil. Despite his good intentions, Morton has a negative impact on the lives of slaves. Because Morton does not take the proper steps to overcome his ignorance of the laws and flee the oppressive system in its entirety, he inadvertently sends his children deeper into slavery and to their eventual deaths when he and Althesia die suddenly of yellow fever.

The more one analyzes Morton's situation, the less sympathetic he becomes. First, Morton's glaring ignorance of the law could have been easily remedied by his education and status in society. Morton is described as a "young physician [who] had been in New Orleans but a few weeks, and had seen very little of slavery" (Brown, *Clotel* 92). He falls in love with Althesia while staying with her owner, and he resolves to buy and marry her. He then gives Althesia a private tutor, but she is only taught "some of those accomplishments which are

necessary for one's taking a position in society" (93). Despite buying a slave, Morton makes no effort to understand the institution of slavery, its politics, or the legal implications of being a slave versus being free.

Second, Henry Morton does not prioritize permanent freedom for his wife and children. Morton knows about his wife's condition because he owns her, and yet he keeps her in the South, where racism and the potential for her to go back into slavery are cultural norms. When confronted with the evils of slavery through Salome Miller, his hired servant who was born free in Germany and ended up in slavery by accident, he takes a decidedly inactive role in the process of gaining her freedom. When his wife exhorts him to find out if Salome's story is true, he first asks Salome's owner if she is truly a slave, then finds "the woman's story was true," but drops the issue when the owner removes Salome from his house. Morton's inaction leaves Salome in slavery, and not until she meets another passenger from the ship from Germany does she get a trial and obtain her freedom. By the end of this story, Althesia, not Morton, is the one who contributes "some money toward bringing about the trial," (118-119). Despite his good qualities, the evils of slavery that the Christian abolitionists highlight do not convict Morton to act. In fact, he is either blissfully ignorant or worse, hypocritical. This ignorance of both the laws and the horrors of slavery in other parts of the South ironically leaves his children deeper in slavery and causes their horrific deaths later in the novel.

### **The Minor Differences Between Wells Brown and Other Abolitionists**

Through *Georgiana* and *Carlton*, Wells Brown creates space for minor characters to both be Christians and liberators, thereby utilizing the structure of his novel to both develop the stock character of liberator and give said liberators definition as Christians within the limited

discourse. While this chapter has focused on Georgiana and her family, this analysis does not include the roles of the Quakers as promoters of freedom, or consider the marriage of George Green and Mary at the end of the novel as a form of delayed freedom also brought about by Christian institutions and moral reform. However, as shown through this basic analysis of minor characters fulfilling or failing to fulfill the role of liberator, we can understand how liberators are either effective in the cases of Carlton and Georgiana or ineffective in the case of Reverend Peck and Henry Morton.

First, according to *Clotel*, liberators are not successful if they do not use Christianity correctly. Christianity promotes the freedom of the slaves, not the personal gain of the master. Therefore, true freedom first means rescuing Christianity from those who seek to use it for personal gain. Second, liberating the slaves involves direct action. In the case of Henry Morton, his inaction throughout the novel leads to the further enslavement and death of his children. Third, true freedom requires strength of conviction. Georgiana dedicates herself to freeing her slaves properly and gradually until her death, ultimately freeing her slaves as an act of good faith on her death bed. Furthermore, Carlton helps her achieve this goal even as she dies at the conclusion of their story. Only through their combined efforts are the slaves able to be truly free.

As seen through the minor characters in *Clotel*, neither laws nor simple moral reform can ensure true and lasting freedom. Morality on its own, as seen through Reverend Peck, cannot redeem Christianity, and without Christianity, there is no strength of conviction. Moral reformers will have the same effect as Henry Morton: they talk a big talk, but are not committed to true freedom like Georgiana and Carlton. This view of Christian conversion as a necessary component of the gradual process of attaining true freedom sets Wells Brown apart from other abolitionists. He is neither a Garrison, who argues for immediate legal emancipation with

pugilistic, Christian rhetoric, a Box Brown, who boldly proclaims that God directly gave him his thirst for freedom in the absence of hardships in slavery, nor a Douglass, who historically abandoned Christianity to argue philosophically for freedom for the slaves. Instead, as expressed through the way *Clotel's* minor characters act within the structure of their subplots, Wells Brown fights for freedom with Christian conversion.



Chapter 2: Freedom Through Marriage in *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom***A Play “For My Own Amusement”**

At just after 8 p.m. on February 2, 1857, an air of expectancy gripped the crowd assembled in the town hall in the little village of Salem, Ohio. The audience leaned forward in their seats, eager to catch a glimpse of the middle-aged black man who strode confidently onto the stage. William Wells Brown, the object of their curiosity, cleared his throat and began to recite from *Experience, or How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone*, the first play authored by an African American. (Cassady)

In the imaginative scene described above, Marsh Cassady offers a glimpse of one of William Wells Brown’s dramatic readings of his plays. Wells Brown, on top of being the first African-American novelist, also wrote two plays. His first play, *Experience, or How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* (c. 1855), has unfortunately never been recovered because it was never published (Cassady). Reviews of the play, however, reveal that *Experience* was a satirical response to a book written by the Reverend Dr. Nehemiah Adams titled *A South-Side View of Slavery; or, Three Months in the South* (1854) (Ernest, *Escape* ix). Adams, a northerner, supported the religion of the South by expressing indifference to the plight of the African slave, saying:

Let us feel and act fraternally with regard to the South, defend them against interference, abstain from everything assuming and dictatorial, leave them to manage their institution in view of their accountability to God... and we may expect that American slavery will cease to be anything but a means of good for the African race. (Adams, 201)

We can imagine what Wells Brown's commentary on Dr. Adams' *laissez faire* attitude would have been. The closest evidence we have is a summary of his play from a favorable review. The main character is a pastor who, like Adams, travels to the South expressing the view that slavery is a boon to blacks (Ernest, *Escape* iix). In a quick turn of events, this pastor is sold into slavery. Not surprisingly, after his first-hand experience with the peculiar institution, he "soon revises his former opinions" (ix).

Wells Brown's second play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*, was published in 1858 and has survived as the first play published by an African American (Ernest, *Escape* x). Like *Experience*, *Clotel*, and his 1847 *Narrative*, the play speaks out against Southerners who claim to be Christians while perpetuating slavery. The main characters in the play, Dr. Gaines and his wife, are a southern couple who physically abuse their slaves in the name of Christianity while ostentatiously speaking about Christ's love to their neighbors and family members. Wells Brown's satire is just as evident here as it must have been in *Experience*. The lines of the main characters, Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, provide the audience with a not-so-subtle commentary about how Christianity and slavery are mutually exclusive.

An important part of understanding these plays involves understanding their performance history. Wells Brown started to perform plays during his lectures to diversify the material in his anti-slavery message. Ernest notes that eventually, Wells Brown realized "he could make more money for the cause if he were to read a play than if he delivered a lecture" (Ernest, *Escape* x). In an 1856 edition, *The Liberator* reported that Wells Brown was devoting his time to both "giving his lyceum lectures and then reading his drama" (*Liberator*, 8 Oct. 1856, qtd. in Ernest, *Escape* x). Since Wells Brown was performing these plays as part of his lecture tours with the American Anti-Slavery Society, he was giving them as a one-man show. According to one

reviewer, Henry C. Wright, notes that Wells Brown read all of the parts by himself “with a most happy dramatic effect” (x).

In this context, it is no surprise that Wells Brown never published *Experience*. His plays were never meant to be performed on a stage with lights and professional actors. Instead, he wrote them to tell a story and express a point of view in a new way that his audiences would understand and find enjoyable. Furthermore, Wells Brown did not have a vision for these plays beyond adding variety to his lectures. Indeed, he only published *The Escape* at the “earnest solicitation of some in whose judgment I have the greatest confidence” (Brown, *Escape* 3). He even goes so far as to state that *The Escape* “was written for my own amusement” in an introductory note to the published edition (3). With this confession, the fine details become that much more important. Even though marriage does not affect the plot of the play directly, the ways in which he works out his ideas for true freedom through the marriages of the play’s minor characters, which include Glen, Melinda, and Cato, provide commentary on the way the sanctity of marriage has been destroyed by slavery. *The Escape* asks the audience not only to realize that southern Christians are hypocritical, but also to think about how marriage leads Glen and Melinda to freedom while keeping Cato enslaved.

This chapter argues that conceptions of freedom in *The Escape* are created by the collision of Christian marriage with slavery in the lives of the minor characters. In effect, Christian marriage creates an impetus for and actively leads characters to true freedom that is connected to moral reform. In *The Escape*, the freedom created by Christian marriage manifests itself in the marriage of Glen and Melinda. Conversely, Cato’s marriage to Hannah opposes this idea. In the context of both promoting and ensuring freedom, marriage expressly sanctioned by

God gives the reader a new understanding of how important Christianity is to the cause of freedom.

### **Establishing Minor Characters**

*The Escape*, like *Clotel* and nineteenth-century literature in general, contains a full cast of characters and several intertwining subplots. One difficulty inherent in establishing minor characters is determining where the audience's attention *should* be drawn within the character system. On the one hand, the title of a work could suggest which characters are central and which are minor. In *Clotel*, the title implies that the eponymous Clotel and her immediate family are the central characters. Accordingly, most scholarship on Wells Brown's novel does not consider Carlton and Georgiana's story, even though their subplot occupies a significant portion of the discourse. Thus, the title of a work can indicate who the central characters of a story are, regardless of how much space in the discourse the author gives them.

The principle for determining major and minor characters based on the title of the work does not readily lend itself to interpreting *The Escape*. Judging by the title, any of the play's six principal characters who are involved in the final scene of the play where Glen, Melinda, and Cato escape could be the major character of the story. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter One, Wells Brown uses a plethora of stock characters, including Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, Glen and Melinda, Cato and Mr. White. John Ernest, in his analysis of the play, focuses on these characters and the roles they play. The stock characters include:

Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, the white slaveholders and owners of the farm at Muddy Creek, Missouri; Glen and Melinda, both enslaved, who are in love but who are forbidden to marry; the appropriately named Mr. White, the white northerner who visits the South and

confronts the realities of slavery; and Cato, a houseservant to the Gaineses. (Ernest, *Reconstruction* 1110)

Since all of these so-called principal characters are equal in terms of their recognizable attributes and the predetermined roles that they perform, none of them naturally command any more attention than the others.

The subtitle suggests that, since Glen dramatically uses the phrase “a leap for freedom” in Act 4, Scene 3, he could be the central character to whom the audience should give the most attention. Yet the characters who ultimately escape occupy significantly less space in the discourse than Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, and they are given a comparable amount of stage time to Reverend Pinchen and the slave speculators. Therefore, judging by which characters the discourse focuses on, Dr. and Mrs. Gaines are undoubtedly the protagonists within the character system created by these six stock characters. They appear either together or individually in thirteen of the twenty scenes. By contrast, Glen and Melinda appear on stage in only eight of the twenty scenes, and out of those eight scenes, three are shared with Dr. and Mrs. Gaines. Furthermore, even the scenes in which they appear alone on stage contribute to their minor status, as these short scenes are designed simply to show what is happening while the action is taking place elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The lack of both lines and stage appearances of the “escaping” characters complicates any attempt to deduce the major characters from the title, especially when the title refers to a larger, climactic plot event instead of to a specific character’s escape.

Given the medium of the play and the context of its creation and performance as a response to contemporary pro-slavery texts, the characters in *The Escape* should be interpreted with a discourse-based view of minor characters. That is, minor characters compete for space within character-systems through their “relative position vis-à-vis other characters” (Woloch 18).

Therefore, Dr. and Mrs. Gaines are the central characters in the play because the discourse about the hypocrisy of slavery revolves around them from the beginning. Accordingly, Glen, Melinda, and even Cato are all minor characters, not only because they take up less space in the discourse but also because their identities “[emerge] through, and [revolve] around, [their] subordinated position” to Dr. and Mrs. Gaines (Woloch 4). The subplots in which they are involved depend upon the initial actions of Dr. and Mrs. Gaines, who not only promote false marriages, but also create a reason for the slave’s ultimate escape.

### **Freedom through Marriage: Glen and Melinda**

Due to their minor status in *The Escape*, Glen’s and Melinda’s scenes together are short. Wells Brown condenses the information that the audience needs to know about their actions into these shorter scenes so that the main action of the play can continue unimpeded. For example, Glen’s introductory speech in Act 1, Scene 3 establishes two facts about the situation that drives his subplot and leads to his eventual escape to Canada with Melinda. First, Glen and Melinda are married to each other in the eyes of God. In his Shakespearean opening monologue,<sup>4</sup> Glen waits for Melinda to come to him and emphasizes these aspects of his marriage to the audience: “I clasped her to my bosom, and called God to witness that I would ever regard her as my wife” (Brown, *Escape* 10). In the context of slavery, their marriage is scandalous and even illegal.

In most cases, slaves were not allowed to marry for love, a point that Wells Brown emphasizes repeatedly throughout the play in the lines of Mrs. Gaines. For example, in Act 3, Scene 1, Mrs. Gaines forces Hannah to marry Cato, assuming that she wants to get married by repeatedly telling her “you need not tell me, Hannah, that you don’t want another husband, I know better... I know there’s no woman living that can be happy and satisfied without a

husband” (Brown, *Escape* 22-23). Therefore, marriage among slaves does not have any of the defining characteristics that Glen describes in his monologue. This introduction of a marriage that is both Christian and defies slavery speaks directly against the way marriage is used by Dr. and Mrs. Gaines and the prevailing slaveholding culture of nominal Christians in the South.

A second aspect of their marriage that Wells Brown highlights in Glen’s monologue is that his marriage to Melinda is performed outside of slavery. Glen and Melinda purposefully hide their marriage from their masters by getting “old Uncle Joseph [to join them] in holy wedlock” secretly at night. When combined with the fact that God has sanctioned their marriage, their secret act of defiance suggests that they believe God sanctions marriages conducted outside of slavery. Evidently, if Glen and Melinda had gotten married in the normal way, possibly by “jumping the broomstick” in a sham ceremony like Cato and Hannah do in Act 3, Scene 2, then God would not approve their marriage. Glen also assures himself that “a just God will sanction [his] union in heaven” (Brown, *Escape* 10). This appeal to God’s justice is an implicit denunciation of slavery as unjust, and sets up the central conflict between true, Christian marriage and nominal marriage in slavery. Simply based on the observation that their marriage takes place outside of the context of slavery and is sanctioned by God, the marriage itself is related to both freedom and Christianity.

God’s involvement and approval of their marriage creates friction between Glen and Melinda and Dr. and Mrs. Gaines. Glen and Melinda are not allowed to get married because Dr. Gaines “wants [Melinda] for himself,” and knows that their marriage is more legitimate than any marriage he can impose on them (Brown, *Escape* 10). Therefore, out of fear of retaliation, Glen and Melinda commit to each other until death. Glen already lives in fear of his life because his master has threatened to whip him “to death if [he] ever [speaks] to [Melinda] again” (11).

Melinda, for her part, also fears that Dr. Gaines may purchase Glen from his master so that he can “send him out of the way,” presumably further South where he has no chance of escaping with her (12). Ultimately, because of their commitment to each other expressed in their marriage, they will either escape or die together; those are their only two options.

On its own, their illicit marriage, which defies the sexual desire of Dr. Gaines, creates a thrilling story of a fight for life or death. Glen states as much to Melinda in their opening scene: “I could not consent to your degradation. No, Melinda, I can die, but shall never live to see you the mistress of another man” (Brown, *Escape* 11). However, Wells Brown does not write a thriller because Glen, Melinda, and their marriage are all secondary to the way that Wells Brown satirizes the Christianity of the South through Dr. and Mrs. Gaines. Instead of taking the audience into Glen and Melinda’s struggle in slavery as a rebellious married couple, Glen introduces the idea of freedom in the very next sentence: “I have a secret to tell you... I’ve long been thinking of making my escape to Canada, and taking you with me” (11-12). For Glen and Melinda, marriage and freedom are inseparable ideas. In fact, their marriage necessitates their freedom.

Melinda is aware that Dr. Gaines understands how marriage will lead to freedom. She regrets how her master will most likely use her marriage to Glen to further subjugate her: “Glen will be separated from me, for there is nothing too base and mean for master to do for the purpose of getting me entirely in his power” (Brown, *Escape* 11). These lines show how Melinda has escaped Dr. Gaines’s power through her marriage. Therefore, the only way Dr. Gaines can get her back in his control is to remove Glen, who is the cause of her desire for freedom. To get her “entirely in his power,” Dr. Gaines must crush her spirit and remove all thoughts of freedom, on top of keeping her in line through normal threats of violence. Wells Brown, through



Melinda's aside, shows how much slave owners fear marriage ordained by God, especially when they have a competing sexual interest in the female slave. In the case of Glen and Melinda, their marriage is their main impetus for freedom, and destroying their marriage would destroy their hope.

Thus, Glen and Melinda, as minor characters with a limited number of lines that contribute to their character development, must gain their narrative identities through the roles they play as a married couple. However, their marriage is no ordinary marriage in the context of slavery. Whereas most slaves in their nonfiction narratives describe how marriage within slavery is "antithetical to freedom" because connections drag them down as they try to escape, Glen and Melinda's marriage and dedication to each other and to God, much like the actual marriage of escaped slaves William and Ellen Craft (1824-1900, 1826-1891), helps them attain freedom (Heglar 28). Therefore, as much as they are a stock married couple, they are also a Christian married couple. Their dedication and love furthers their cause for freedom and demonstrates how God-ordained marriage is both part of the structure that makes them seek freedom and part of their identity as minor characters.

### **Marriage and Identity: Cato**

According to Woloch, one of the main factors that makes a character minor is their subordinate position to the main characters. In this way, Cato is a truly minor character in *The Escape* because everything that he does at the beginning of the play is a direct reaction to either Dr. or Mrs. Gaines. His subordinate status leads to Cato's peculiar identity, which is always changing in the play depending upon what Dr. Gaines tells him to do. In Act 1, Scene 2, what Cato can do as a doctor depends entirely upon Dr. Gaines' limited instructions that apply only to

slaves instead of the free men who may stop by. Dr. Gaines tells Cato to “feel their pulse, look at their tongues, bleed them, and give them each a dose of calomel” (Brown, *Escape* 7). With these simple instructions, Cato’s identity suddenly changes, as he claims, “I always knowed I was a doctor, an’ now the old boss has put me at it, I muss change my coat” (7) Even though Dr. Gaines only gives him specific instructions to administer medicine, Cato suddenly feels that he can “bleed, pull teef, or cut off a leg” because Dr. Gaines gives him the limited ability to be a “doctor” (7).

John Ernest observes that “identity is a performance on the cultural stage” for all of the characters in *The Escape* (Ernest, *Reconstruction* 1110). In fact, “almost all are involved in a deceptive performance of selfhood,” the most notable of whom is Cato, who, even though he “seems to fulfill the nineteenth-century stereotype of a cowardly and conniving slave, often reveals that he is involved in a multilayered performance—especially when he seizes the opportunity to escape to Canada” (1110). While Ernest emphasizes the performative nature of Cato’s character to show how “[Wells] Brown underlines the extent to which character is constituted by both situation and society,” I contend that the constant and sudden shifts in Cato’s character also represent a deeper search for an identity that has been taken away from him by slavery, specifically by his fear of punishment and his forced, unchristian marriage to Hannah perpetuated by Mrs. Gaines (1111). When he changes into doctor’s clothes in Act 1, Scene 2, or even when he names himself “Alexander Washington Napoleon Pompey Caesar” in Act 5, Scene 3, as much as he is performing, he is also searching (Brown, *Escape* 40).

Therefore, when Cato escapes from Dr. Gaines in Act 5, Scene 3, the first question he asks himself is, “I wonder if dis is me?” (Brown, *Escape* 40). Furthermore, based on his self-doubt, it appears that his initial escape occurs without much forethought. He comments with

surprise in his aside that “By golly, I’m free as a frog. But maybe I is mistaken; maybe dis ain’t me. Cato, is dis you?” (40). At this point, Cato has gained enough distance from slavery to realize that he can be free if he wants to be. However, he is not yet fully free because he has not found an identity outside of the role he played in slavery. His name change to “Alexander Washington Napoleon Pompey Caesar”, while significant, is not an identity change as much as it is an irrational safeguard against getting caught, as he even says, “but, stop! I muss change my name, kase ole massa might foller me, and somebody might tell him dat dey seed Cato; so I’ll change my name” (40). Cato’s name change is obviously ridiculous both because Cato is already in disguise and because changing his name does not change his appearance. Therefore, his name change is an incomplete identity change that corresponds to his incomplete freedom at this point in the play.

Cato still lingers in a subordinate position to Dr. Gaines because he is married to Hannah. This marriage, over which Mrs. Gaines presides in Act 3, Scene 2, is the opposite of Glen’s and Melinda’s in every conceivable way. First, whereas Glen and Melinda get married because of their love for each other, Cato is afraid of punishment, stating that he would “jump de broomstick wid every woman on de place ef missis wants me to, before I’ll be whipped” (Brown, *Escape* 26). Furthermore, Hannah states that she “does not like Cato” and is not happy about the prospect of marrying and living with him (27). Second, Glen and Melinda are married outside of slavery, whereas the fact that Mrs. Gaines presides over the ceremony designed for field hands shows that her version of marriage is a product of the institution. Thus, the marriage of Glen and Melinda guides them to freedom because it occurs outside of slavery, whereas Cato’s keeps him in slavery because it comes from within slavery.

Accordingly, Cato does not find an identity outside of slavery until he disavows his marriage to Hannah in Act 5, Scene 4. In the presence of the Quaker family, he casually states how “It makes me feel bad when I think I ain’t a-gwine to see my wife no more. But, come, chillen, let’s be makin’ tracks” (Brown, *Escape* 45). This comment carries huge implication for Cato’s character. After this moment, his marriage to Hannah no longer holds him back from escaping with Glen and Melinda. Therefore, through his status as a minor character who undergoes marriage, Cato also has a role to play in developing the idea that marriage leads to freedom, though in the opposite way to Glen and Melinda. While Glen’s and Melinda’s God-ordained marriage leads them to freedom, Cato’s slave marriage is a part of his identity in slavery that he must get rid of, as he does in front of the Quaker family, before he can be truly free.

Considering the necessity of casting off the chains of non-Christian marriage shown by Cato’s multi-step journey to freedom, Cato’s conversion experience at the end of the play, where he gets religion “in de meetin’” in Buffalo, is the culmination of his search for an identity outside of slavery (Brown, *Escape* 47). Like everything else that Cato does, his conversion experience is laughable. The sheer randomness of his words in this speech furthers Ernest’s observation about stock characters: Cato is, undoubtedly, a character straight out of a black face minstrel show. However, Cato’s conversion experience at the end of the play is far from arbitrary. It symbolizes the full formation of his identity. Whereas at the beginning of the play, Cato forms his identity based on everything Dr. Gaines wanted him to do, by the end, even when he gets lost from the company of escaping slaves and there is no one around, he still waits at the ferry for them, thinking “I spec dey’ll soon come” (47). Only once he abandons his slave marriage can he be truly free and find his identity in this conversion experience that precedes his decision to escape on his

own. Unlike in his earlier escape, where he seemingly stumbled upon freedom, Cato travels to the ferry on his own, and leads the charge in the escape, waving his hat in celebration of his freedom with Glen as the curtain falls. With his newfound identity, Cato makes his own decisions for the first time, and unashamedly chooses freedom, cursing his master as he remembers his marriage to Hannah that he must leave behind to be free.

### **Minorness, Marriage, and Freedom**

The final scene of the play, in which Glen, Melinda, and Cato all escape, shows how God-ordained marriage and freedom go hand in hand. Glen and Melinda remain committed to their original resolution that their marriage put into their hearts by choosing to “die here...[rather] than again go into slavery” (Brown, *Escape* 47). On the other side of the spectrum, Cato’s marriage shows how marriage in slavery perpetuates the institution when used by people like Dr. and Mrs. Gaines who are not true Christians. According to Wells Brown, as expressed through the minor characters’ marriages, God gives man the institution of marriage, which imparts an idea of freedom, and leads to an escape to freedom. Furthermore, marriage that is not ordained by God does the opposite by hindering a slave’s ability to escape and tying them to slavery. In Cato’s case, his entire identity was tied to slavery and his slave marriage. He makes his own decision to escape only after he both distances himself from slavery and lets go of his marriage to Hannah.

As shown by its performance history, Wells Brown wrote *The Escape* primarily to attack the hypocritical nature of Christianity in the South through the characters of Dr. and Mrs. Gaines. They hypocritically claim to be Christians around their friends and neighbors while they simultaneously beat, sell, and sexually abuse their slaves. The concerning nature of their actions

guides how the audience reacts to the play, but leaves room for the minor characters who undergo marriage to speak about freedom at the same time.

Wells Brown's conception of freedom in *The Escape* is as dependent on the positive influence of the marriage of Glen and Melinda as it is on the negative influence of Cato's. Many narratives and novels from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to William and Ellen Craft's narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) explore the idea that Christian marriage and freedom are closely connected. However, Wells Brown's analysis of marriage is unique because, in the minorness, he also hides a counter example of a marriage that, as part of the institution of slavery, hinders the development of Cato's identity. Therefore, as much as the marriage itself leads Glen and Melinda to freedom, the crucial factor is that their marriage is both ordained by God and takes place outside of slavery. Through this comparison, Wells Brown argues that this type of marriage creates a desire for freedom in the hearts of the slaves and sustains that desire through the trials of an escape attempt more than any other type. God-ordained marriage, not just any marriage between slaves, naturally creates and leads to true freedom in the same way that marriage within slavery inhibits it.

Chapter 3: Freedom Through Prayer in *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*.

*Written by Himself*

**Christianity in the Classic Slave Narrative Tradition, 1830 - 1861**

While William Wells Brown's career involved many firsts, when he published his first *Narrative* in 1847, the tradition of slaves publishing their autobiographies, with or without the help of an amanuensis, was already more than seventy years old. Even in the American context, Wells Brown published his experiences in slavery on the heels of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Even under Douglass's shadow, however, Wells Brown holds a special place with other escaped slaves in the literary canon as the author of a self-written, book-length slave narrative written before the Civil War. Charles Heglar, in his attempt to define these authors' places within the slave narrative tradition, notes the following:

Of the works published between 1830 and 1861, literary scholars, recognizing the importance of the prerogatives of authorship, give a special position to the self-authored, book-length accounts; these scholars, thus, designate [Wells Brown as one of] the "classic" writers of the "classic" period. (14)

Since Wells Brown's narrative falls under Heglar's definition of "classic," it follows certain conventions. The structure of the story, the narrative voice, and the plot line share similarities with other nineteenth century slave narratives. However, the main difference between Douglass, the giant of the American slave narrative tradition, and Wells Brown lies in their treatment of Christianity and Christian prayer. In fact, their differing experiences with Christianity amount to one of the "differences in life experience [that] can lead to differences in theme and conventions" among the classic authors (Heglar 23). In fact, Wells Brown's conception of true freedom from

slavery is hidden in these differences, and this conception of freedom, which is tied to how he uses prayer in his *Narrative* sets his texts apart from the predominant, political views of freedom expressed in other classic narratives like Douglass's.

Scholars have historically favored Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, "consciously and unconsciously [accepting his conventions as] standards for 'classic' narratives" (Heglar 27). Subsequently, Douglass's satirical references to Christianity detract from the significance of the uses of Christianity in other classic narratives. For example, Box Brown states that freedom is an ideal given to him by God, whereas Douglass's main impetus for freedom is literacy. In his youth, when one of his masters tells him that he can no longer learn to read because it would do "a great deal of harm", Douglass states that, "from that moment, I understood [that] the pathway from slavery to freedom" required learning to read, despite his master's intentions to stop him. (Douglass 303, 304). Even though Douglass does give God some credit for his desire for freedom, he views "the living word of faith and spirit of hope" as encouraging forces that helped him maintain his conviction that "slavery would not always be able to hold [him] within its foul embrace," not as primary suppliers of his desire for freedom like Box Brown (Douglass 302). Therefore, throughout his life as a slave, Douglass's desire to learn to read and write, not a desire for freedom given to him by God, leads him to escape both because literacy creates in his heart the desire to be independent, and because he could defy his master through learning to read.

In light of Douglass limited references to Christianity in his *Narrative*, Wells Brown deviates from the "established" tradition in his references to Christianity and, more specifically, prayer. Throughout his narrative, Wells Brown's prayers and diatribes against southern Christianity correspond with how close he feels to being free. Because of this connection, Christianity, prayer and closeness to God are foundational to Wells Brown's feelings about



freedom. Furthermore, as much as true Christianity and its practices are foundational to freedom, they are also minor. Wells Brown still writes the rest of the narrative in the established tradition by speaking about slavery as it is in his own voice. However, Wells Brown paradoxically stresses Christianity as paramount to freedom by putting it in the background of his *Narrative*, which mainly focuses on the unrestrained physical brutality he witnesses and experiences as a slave. Thus, he highlights prayer as an impetus for freedom in his own life by connecting his prayers to his thoughts about freedom.

### **Christianity in Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative**

In his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass recounts what he knows of his life from his birth in slavery to his present situation as an escaped slave in the North working as an abolitionist with William Lloyd Garrison. Throughout his *Narrative*, Douglass lambasts southern Christians, at one point commenting that the fact that having a new master who “made no pretensions to, or profession of, religion” was “truly a great advantage” because religious masters were consistently more cruel to their slaves (Douglass 334). Even though he attacks “Christians,” he never once references “Christianity” in a positive light. To counter this disparity, Douglass includes an appendix that explains his true opinion of Christianity:

What I have said [in the body of the narrative] respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference— so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. (363)

In the opening portion of the appendix, which subsequently includes an extended metaphor that compares slave holders to the Pharisees and a poem that mocks the hypocrisy of the southern religion, Douglass turns his aggressive, biting rhetoric towards Christianity by name for the first time in the *Narrative*. In what can best be described as a diatribe, Douglass lays out for his reader his views on the abhorrent religion practiced in the South that does not deserve to bear the name of Christianity in his eyes.

This portion of the appendix is first and foremost an attack of the religion of the slave holder, and therefore does not actively advance the cause of true Christianity. Furthermore, since Douglass's narrative relegates Christianity to the appendix, Christianity is an end note to his narrative, not an active part of his quest for freedom. Even the critical reviews of his *Narrative* emphasize how it "contains the life of a superior man" (Davis 24). Heglar agrees that "Douglass's work contains the best realization of the tale of transformation from slave to freeman in print," and the credit for this transformation can only be given to Douglass himself, as he methodically details the transformative process by which "a slave was made a man" by fighting to regain his humanity (Heglar 17, Douglass 326). In this way, Douglass's story is overtly humanistic, as it speaks to how he recreates himself as a self-made man.

Furthermore, as Douglass admits, one could read his entire 1845 *Narrative* and come away with the impression that he is not a Christian, or, worse, "an opponent to all religion" (Douglass 363). He therefore goes to great lengths to ensure that no one believes that he is against what he calls "Christianity proper" in the appendix by quoting extensively from Jesus' famous woes to the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 23 to draw a harsh connection between southern Christians and "the ancient scribes and Pharisees" (365). Instead of emphasizing a need for true Christianity, the appendix emphasizes that Douglass is only writing against the religion

that falsely claims to be Christianity. Even as he makes this necessary rhetorical move to clarify his position, he furthers his point about the southern religion by admitting that all references to Christianity in the body of his *Narrative* are negative.

Ultimately, Douglass's references to Christianity are a destructive attack against Southerners' use of Christianity, not a constructive view of how Christianity leads to freedom. In the appendix, Douglass argues that true Christianity must, without exception, promote peace, generosity, sexual purity, evangelism, and honest labor, but does so only by juxtaposing the religion of the South with the religion of Christ. Furthermore, he never references Christianity as the religion of freedom. The true Christianity of Christ, for Douglass, is simply "pure, peaceable, and impartial," (Douglass 363). Therefore, the precedent that Douglass sets is that references to true Christianity, in the slave narrative, should be used to show the hypocrisy inherent in the slave-holder's religion.

### **Wells Brown's use of the Conventions of Classic Slave Narratives**

Like Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, Wells Brown's *Narrative* is also a "classic" narrative as defined earlier by Heglar. The arc of the plot, the narrative voice, and the descriptions of the brutality of slavery for a Northern audience all exemplify the conventions of antebellum slave narratives. First, both Douglass and Wells Brown describe similar plot points as they "awaken to their physical and mental enslavement in the South, resolve to be free, and use various individual means to escape to the North, where they end their physical and psychological quests for freedom" (Heglar 9). Heglar refers to this condensed four-step process as the "vertical trope that is central to the antebellum narrative," (Heglar 9). While Douglass by no means invented the four steps that lead him from slavery to freedom, his narrative's overt use of the vertical trope

makes it one of the most easily identifiable characteristics of his *Narrative* that is also found in other classic slave narratives.

Wells Brown's and Douglass' narratives can both be reduced to these four core elements. Both authors highlight them through their diction and direct references to the events that signal them. In Wells Brown's case, he awakens to his physical and mental enslavement in the South through exposure to violence, uses the verb "resolve" when he resolves to be free, speaks about his own creativity during his escape attempts, and ends his psychological quest for freedom when he joins the abolitionist circuit in the North. Early in his *Narrative*, the sheer violence and brutality of slavery rudely awakens Wells Brown to his condition and leads him to "complain to [his] master of the treatment which [he] received from Major Freeland," then runs away for the first time when he realizes that his complaints "made no difference" (Brown, *Narrative* 381).

Later he is beaten brutally by a man who holds a grudge against him and subsequently resolves to make his escape "to Canada, which I had heard much about as a place where the slave might live, be free, and be protected" (Brown, *Narrative* 385). The only attachment holding him back is his mother, and he subsequently further "resolv[es] never to leave the land of slavery without [his] mother" (385). He then gives details of two creative attempts at escape, one time by stealing a boat, another time by walking away under a disguise on a crowded dock (403, 415). Finally, once he reaches freedom Wells Brown, like Douglass, ends his narrative with a description of his work for the abolitionist movement: "Soon after coming to the North, I subscribed for the *Liberator*, edited by that champion of freedom, William Lloyd Garrison... [and] for the past three years, have been pleading for the victims of American Slavery" (423). Working directly for the abolitionist cause represents the end of the physical and psychological search for freedom for Wells Brown, thus completing the vertical trope.

Second, Wells Brown writes his own narrative in the first-person narrative voice that has both drawn the classic narratives together and set them apart from other slave writings. One difficulty of writing a first-person slave narrative is that slavery necessarily denies the slave both a voice and an identity. The authors of classic slave narratives acknowledge the difficulties of writing as themselves when they speak about how little they know about their own lives. Wells Brown establishes that his identity is largely unknown in the first two sentences of his *Narrative*, stating simply that he “was born in Lexington, Ky” and does not know anything else about his father, George Higgins, because his master stole him “as soon as [he] was born” (Brown, *Narrative* 377). Douglass makes an even bolder claim about his identity, claiming that “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” (Douglass 281). Therefore, these opening sentences that focus on *where* they were born instead of who they are establish this lack of a firm “I” that has captivated readers and made their narratives compelling.

Douglass and Wells Brown define themselves more by what slavery has taken away from them than by who they are or what they have accomplished in their lives. As such, both authors have a crisis of naming, as even that part of their identity has been stolen by slavery. For Wells Brown, the incredible kindness that he received from the Quaker Wells Brown and his wife made him “feel that [he] was not [himself]” (Brown, *Narrative* 419-420). Thus, once he gains an identity outside of slavery, he changes his name, and takes the name of the kind Quaker who gave him freedom even when he was still in the South. Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Washington Augustus Bailey, and changes his last name several times once he escapes, finally settling on Douglass instead of Johnson because “there [are] so many Johnsons in Bedford, it was already quite difficult to distinguish between them” (Douglass 358). However, he keeps

Frederick because, unlike his last name that is connected to slavery, his first name carries “a sense of [his] identity” (358). Like many other slaves, when Douglass reaches freedom in the North, he gets rid of everything that attaches him to slavery and holds onto the only stable part of his identity—the first half of his name

Third, Wells Brown’s narrative emphasizes the overwhelming physical brutality of slavery in general, how it was used against him specifically, and his emotional reactions to the brutality when he witnesses it. Among his descriptions of brutality, the story of Randall is particularly striking. Randall is a slave with Wells Brown who, because of his great strength and power, “was considered the most valuable and able-bodied slave on the plantation” (Brown, *Narrative* 378). Because of these factors, Randall is never whipped by his master. However, Mr. Cook, a new overseer, decides that he was “determined to try it” (379). After giving Randall an impossible task, one of the hands shoots him when Cook and three others cannot take him down. Cook then gives him “over one hundred lashes with a heavy cow hide... [takes] him to a blacksmith’s shop, and [has] a ball and chain attached to his leg” (380). Randall is still required to do the same amount of work as before, and through this process, he is “subdued” (380). This graphic story is one of many in the opening pages of Wells Brown’s narrative. Whereas *Clotel* does not emphasize brutality, Wells Brown does not spare the reader any details, and admits that to record all the instances of extreme brutality that he has seen “would occupy more space than could possibly be allowed in this little volume” (Brown, *Narrative* 383).

Wells Brown also gives examples of how brutality was used against him when he describes how he was “well smoked” by being tied up in a barn while his master burned tobacco leaves underneath him to “smoke” him into submission (Brown, *Narrative* 381). This punishment, which also involved whipping, is both cruel and unusual, and shows how, in the

South, nothing can stop slave holders and their overseers from doing whatever they want to their slaves. Most appallingly, Major Freeland calls the process of whipping and then suffocating a slave in tobacco smoke “Virginia play,” implying that he views abusing slaves as a game.

Finally, in his descriptions of brutality that make up the focus of the narrative, Wells Brown speaks to the ways that the brutality of slavery affects him emotionally by recalling his own remorse and sadness when he witnesses the brutality. In his opening chapter, he remembers how, after his mother receives ten lashes for being late, “the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation in my tears” (Brown, *Narrative* 378). At this point in his story, Wells Brown is a young boy. Not only is his mother punished unfairly, but he is made to sit and listen to her screams. This psychological torment and fear of a similar punishment is another way that slave holders subjugate their slaves from an early age. By describing the brutality generally, specifically, and personally, Wells Brown inserts his *Narrative* firmly in the tradition of classic narratives, which shows how slavery is violent, oppressive, and inherently unjust. By adding his emotional responses to the unimaginable brutality of slavery, Wells Brown no doubt elicits a deeper response from his Northern audience while continuing to speak about the evils of slavery as he experienced them.

The vertical trope, first-person narrator, and detailed descriptions of physical brutality all serve to develop the main purpose of Wells Brown’s classic slave narrative: to reveal the atrocities of slavery in the South to the abolitionists in the North and further polarize the two regions over the issue of slavery. However, as much as these broad similarities between Frederic Douglass and Wells Brown provide a common purpose for writing, they also further highlight differences among the narratives. These differences inspire Charles J. Heglar’s book *Rethinking the Slave Narrative* (2001), which I have been referencing liberally. His analysis of William and

Ellen Craft's *Running One Thousand miles for Freedom* (1860) and Henry Bibb's *Narrative* (1849) is to apply this principle to the theme of marriage within the classic slave narratives. Douglass makes limited reference to it, whereas it plays a central role in both the plot and eventual freedom of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft in their respective narratives. Part of Heglar's argument is that the critical reception of Douglass's narrative has painted the characteristics of the classic slave narrative with a broad brush, and therefore scholars have not been able to see the subtle yet important details that make these narratives distinct from one another, despite their similarities. It seems that Wells Brown and the other authors of classic slave narratives from the nineteenth century will forever remain in Douglass's shadow.

In the remainder of this chapter, I take Heglar's analysis one step further: Wells Brown's background emphasis of Christianity and its relationship to freedom has been marginalized and underappreciated because Douglass references Christianity solely to attack southern Christianity. The greatest difference between Douglass and Wells Brown lies in the different ways in which they use Christianity as a literary tool: Douglass uses it to destroy, whereas Wells Brown uses it to create.

### **Christianity's Influences on Wells Brown's Thoughts about Freedom**

Wells Brown reveals his thoughts about Christianity at the beginning of his *Narrative* with the opening letter "To Wells Brown, of Ohio" (Brown, *Narrative* 371). This letter is saturated with Christian imagery, as Wells Brown makes direct references to Jesus's eschatological teaching in Matthew 25:31-46: "I was a stranger and you took me in. I was hungry and you fed me. Naked was I, and you clothed me" (371). More than thanking his



namesake for his Christian generosity, Wells Brown thanks him for his role in ensuring his freedom through showing him true Biblical Christianity.

Wells Brown, by inscribing “this little narrative of the sufferings from which I was fleeing when you had compassion upon me” to his Quaker patron, expresses gratitude to his friend for giving freedom to someone who would not have attained it otherwise (Brown, *Narrative* 371). Christianity, specifically Christian charity, should therefore be viewed as a positive force that ensured Wells Brown’s freedom even before reading the narrative. Wells Brown, as evidenced by his name, is not a self-made man. In the letter, he states that he is directly indebted to Christianity through the life of his Quaker friend and namesake. In his narrative, he is also indebted to the dream of freedom that Christianity actively gives to those who believe.

After the opening letter, Wells Brown appears to use Christianity in much the same way as Douglass does in his appendix: he attacks the slave holders and points out the hypocrisy in their religious beliefs. At one point, he recalls how a certain Mr. D. D. Paige, “tied up a woman of his... and whipped her nearly to death; yet he was a deacon in the Baptist church, in good and regular standing... She was a member of the same church with her master” (Brown, *Narrative* 389). While Wells Brown does not use as colorful language as Douglass, the implicit attack in the foreground of his *Narrative* is the same: Southern Christians, especially those who physically punish their slaves, do not practice true Christianity.

In the background, however, Christianity is directly connected to freedom in Wells Brown’s creative imagination. For example, he often prays later in the *Narrative* after he resolves to escape to Canada with his mother. One specific instance where Wells Brown prays occurs when he witnesses Mr. Walker remove a crying baby from its mother and give it to an

acquaintance. Wells Brown describes his reaction to the scene from his vantage point of a hired slave driver: “When I saw this woman crying for her child so piteously, a shudder, —a feeling akin to horror, shot through my frame. I have often since in my imagination heard her crying for her child” (Brown, *Narrative* 394). After the mother is chained to the rest of the slaves because she no longer has a child, Wells Brown quotes a somber poem. He describes it as “a song I have often heard the slaves sing, when about to be carried to the far South” (395). The song encompasses events that lead slaves further into bondage such as “being sold to Georgia,” and the separation of wives, husbands, and children (395). Being sold farther South means being farther away from freedom. As such, the refrain of the song is a cry for true freedom— the year of jubilee, when all slaves are freed according to God’s law in the Old Testament:

Will you go along with me?...

Come sound the jubilee!...

Go sound the jubilee!...

Go sound the jubilee!...

There’s a better day a coming,

Go sound the jubilee! (395-396)

Because of its poetic style, vivid imagery, and question and answer style, the song also becomes a prayer on the page as Wells Brown cries out to God with the other slaves before him for deep, unshakable freedom that cannot be taken away.

To emphasize the dual nature of this text, the third and fourth verses also resemble a prayer in the way that they cry out to God for deliverance and ask Him to come and end slavery directly:

O Gracious Lord! When shall it be,

that we poor souls shall all be free  
 Lord, break them slavery powers...  
 Dear Lord, dear Lord, when slavery'll cease,  
 Then we poor souls will have our peace. (395-396)

Even though it is a song, in context, Wells Brown is offering it as a prayer for this helpless woman who is as far away from freedom as possible because he feels unimaginable pity for her. Part of this empathy and pity comes from his position of authority over her as a slave driver, but most of it is natural human sympathy for one whose plight is far worse than one's own. The fact that this prayer, which he did not write, comes directly after a poem that he composed shows that Wells Brown is at a loss for words after witnessing this level of disregard for human life by Mr. Walker. His only response is to offer this prayer to God at the moment when his fellow slave is farthest from freedom to give her hope that she will one day be free. The implicit assumption is that she needs hope because she is so far from freedom that it may seem impossible. Freedom, in this instance, would require an act of God, which is one of the reasons why Wells Brown prays for her.

A second time that Wells Brown prays is when he prays for his master in his sickness. The prayer comes while Wells Brown is in jail with his mother after their failed escape attempt. In this specific prayer, Wells Brown is not praying "for his recovery, but for his death" (Brown, *Narrative*, 406). He admits that, "nothing brought more joy to my heart than that intelligence that my master was sick" (406). While this statement about prayer is bitingly humorous, there is also a deeper understanding of the power and purpose of prayer. In context, Wells Brown and his mother have just been arrested after an almost successful escape attempt. They are waiting to be returned to their master, and will surely go deeper into slavery and oppression now that they

have attempted to escape. Wells Brown recounts his thought process: he knows his master “would be exasperated at having to pay for [his] apprehension, and knowing his cruelty,” he is afraid (406). Wells Brown has also just learned that his sister, Elizabeth, whom he had visited in the same jail before his escape attempt, has been sold as well. He can only assume that he will never see her again. Wells Brown knows that neither he nor his mother will have the chance to be free again once his master reaches him in jail. Therefore, his fervent prayer for his master’s death, aside from being spiteful, contains a hidden, honest, last chance plea to God for even a glimpse of freedom for him and his mother, as they will surely be sold farther South, away from freedom.

Shortly after his prayer, in the same chapter, Wells Brown’s worst fears are realized for his mother as his master sells her farther south, but decides to keep him on account of a promise he made to Wells Brown’s father not to sell him “to supply the New Orleans market” (Brown, *Narrative* 406). Her last words to him as the boat leaves are a desperate prayer: “God be with you!” (408). He watches the boat pull away “with a heavy heart, waiting to see her leave the wharf” (408). In this moment, he can no longer fulfill his resolution to be free with his mother. Upon losing his mother to the deep south, Wells Brown becomes the woman whose child was given away: “the love of liberty that had been burning in my bosom, had well nigh gone out” (408). His mother, in an unexpected twist, becomes the one offering the prayer for him with her final words. At the moment, he fears losing freedom the most, she prays for him. When that freedom has been effectively lost, he needs hope, which his mother attempts to provide with one final Christian blessing. However, in his distance from God, he is also further from freedom than he has even been before.

Over the next two pages, as Wells Brown reflects upon life without his mother, his feelings about freedom, “the love of liberty” that has been constant in his life, change from a sputtering candle to a roaring fire (Brown, *Narrative* 408). His thoughts change, rather suddenly, from utter hopelessness to renewed anticipation as he begins “to lay... plans for [his] escape from slavery” to Canada again (410). This shift from apathy to renewed vigor coincides with a renewed rage against southern Christianity, which, in turn, renews his previous resolution to be free. First, almost immediately after his mother is sold, when “the love of liberty” is gone, Wells Brown dejectedly goes back to work on a steam boat, and sees the slave driver, Mr. Walker, again (408). This time, he has slaves from Wells Brown’s old master’s brother, and Wells Brown immediately attacks southern Christianity on behalf of his fellow slaves.

One, slave named Solomon, “was a preacher, and belonged to the same church with his master” (Brown, *Narrative* 409). Wells Brown states that he “was glad to see the old man. He wept like a child when he told me how he had been sold from his wife and children” (409). When Wells Brown sees Solomon, a preacher who has suffered at the hands of southern Christians, it sparks Wells Brown’s anger that comes out on the next page in his most biting attack of the southern Christianity. In many ways, it resembles the opening scenes of *Clotel*:

It was not uncommon in St. Louis to pass by an auction-stand and behold a woman upon the auction-block, and hear a seller crying out, “... *she has got religion!*” Why should this man tell the purchasers that she has religion? I answer, because in Missouri, and as far as I have any knowledge of slavery in the other states, the religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him to be a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault... and slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them. (410)

While this satirical speech resembles Douglass's appendix, it differs from it significantly in that Wells Brown firmly establishes himself against this practice of profiting from the "Christianity" of the slave trade by affirming Solomon's role as a preacher. Wells Brown does not need to include an appendix like Douglass because from this attack, his readers know that he stands against this twisted form of Christianity, used "in Missouri" and "other states" for expressly evil purposes. In his attacks against the religion of the South, Wells Brown makes sure that he is opposed to only the "religious teaching", and not Christianity in general.

After this speech, Wells Brown goes from losing all hope of freedom to planning his freedom again, saying that he "again began to lay my plans for making [his] escape from slavery" in the next paragraph (Brown, *Narrative* 410). His reflections on freedom after his mother's prayer connect these two poles as he meets a Christian slave, and subsequently turns his attention to Christianity in the South. Wells Brown's attack against Christianity in the South brings his thoughts full circle; after resolving to be free once again, Wells Brown escapes, and he is aided along the way by the same man to whom he dedicates the book, the Quaker Wells Brown. Both prayers and general reflections on true Christianity actively push Wells Brown away from thinking about how he will never be free and towards planning his escape to freedom in Canada.

### **Praying for Freedom**

Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has dominated the way critics have interpreted every other slave narrative written in the years leading up to the Civil War. His *Narrative* establishes the vertical trope, a first-person narrator without a real identity, and descriptions of brutality as the three main elements of a classic slave narrative. However, within this established

tradition, there is significant variation in conceptions of freedom, where it comes from, and how it is created in the heart of the slave. Douglass's narrative famously associates freedom with literacy. Once he learns to read under the instruction of a kind mistress as an adolescent, he triumphantly states that how he now understands "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Brown, *Narrative* 304). Through literacy, he can write, and through writing, he can share his *Narrative* and thus change the face of abolition.

Douglass's use of Christianity and the way he speaks about Christianity in the South, however is purely satirical. Douglass attacks the slaveholding religion of the South to the point where he feels the need to add an appendix to clarify his views on Christianity. Wells Brown, on the other hand, both attacks southern Christianity in the same way as Douglass and further describes how he prays himself for justice and freedom when both he and those around him feel farthest from it. Thus, there are significant differences not only in conceptions of freedom, but also themes that are emphasized among classic slave narratives which tell readers about the subtle differences between the authors. Even though Douglass may be more widely read and well known than Wells Brown, his views on all subjects do not represent the views of all slave narratives and their authors. These differences, when fully understood, provide nuance to how readers interpret the different ways authors of classic narratives choose to represent freedom in their works.

Wells Brown emphasizes all the elements of a classic slave narrative in foreground of his *Narrative*: he directly talks about the vertical trope, speaks in the first person, and relays graphic stories about the unrestrained brutality in slavery. However, beneath the surface, prayer is an important positive force that leads to freedom in his life in much the same way that learning to read and write leads to freedom in Douglass's life. Furthermore, Christians themselves influence

his thoughts and feelings about freedom at key points in the text. When he needs to encourage others like the woman whose child is taken from her, he prays for them. When he himself feels lost and farthest from God, his thirst for freedom returns as other people, like his mother, pray for him. And when all hope has been lost, he is reminded of true Christianity by the sufferings of a fellow Christian slave, which reignites his passion to escape and be free. Where *Clotel* stresses the importance of the conversion experience in its subplots, and *The Escape* highlights the importance of Christian marriage in its minor characters, Wells Brown's own conception of freedom in his narrative is informed by his understanding of how closeness to God through prayer and thinking about Christianity rightly understood creates a desire for freedom. Because his use of Christianity is not part of the main conventions of the classic narrative, Wells Brown's understanding of freedom is only recognizable when viewed against Frederick Douglass's satirical use of Christianity. Once the similarities between their narratives are removed, the minor differences reveal how prayer and Christianity can create a passion for freedom, even when all hope has been lost.



## Epilogue: Minor Voices and Major Ideas

My personal goal for this thesis is to bring William Wells Brown's early fiction and *Narrative* out of the shadows of the literary canon and into the critical conversation surrounding escaped slaves who became authors in the nineteenth century. From a literary perspective, this means first bringing Wells Brown's minor voice to the table with the likes of Frederick Douglass, then bringing the minor differences in his works to the surface so that everyone can observe them. Therefore, I have first shown how this small sample of Wells Brown's writings fits into established literary traditions with stock characters, familiar plots, recognizable styles, and established tropes, and furthermore explained how Wells Brown deviates from these forms and traditions by using Christian themes and institutions in unusual ways to create his own definition of freedom that is unescapably tied to his understanding of Christianity as the religion of freedom and love. These minor differences, which turn liberators into *Christian* liberators, emphasize *God-ordained* marriage over slave marriage, and connect thoughts about God with thoughts about freedom, are hidden in the background of his works in much the same way that Wells Brown's voice is hidden in the background of modern critical scholarship on slave narratives.

I believe that William Wells Brown has a lot to tell us about what it means to be free, and how we, as a society, can attain true freedom if we view him as a Christian reformer instead of a moral reformer. Of scholars who study William Wells Brown's work, too many have seen his attacks on the immorality of slavery in *Clotel*, *The Escape*, and even his *Narrative* and labeled him a moral reformer, often ignoring his minor characters and subplots in their analysis. Some, like Judith Madera, have observed that he passionately dismisses legal reform in favor of moral reform, but still do not understand that his morality is based on his interpretation of the Bible as a

religious document that promotes complete freedom and helps Christians commit to loving their neighbor as themselves. As I have argued, Wells Brown's conception of the reform necessary for true freedom goes beyond simple moral reform to a new reform shaped by Christian conversion experiences, institutions, and practices.

In the foreground of his works, Wells Brown attacks slavery. In the background, he builds an idea of freedom that is holistic, complete, and dependent on Christianity. In my opinion, Wells Brown's reputation as an unashamed Christian reformer with a daring and powerful conception of freedom lives and dies in subplots of *Clotel*. While *The Escape* speaks to how Christianity, separate from slavery, creates a desire for freedom, and his *Narrative* shows how prayers and thoughts about religion can bring a slave back from the depths of despair, in *Clotel*, he explains what true freedom entails through the lives of Georgiana and Carlton. The slaves do not receive true freedom unless Georgiana is a Christian. They do not receive her promise to free them unless Carlton helps her after his conversion. Carlton is not converted unless Georgiana defends the Bible from her father's misinterpretations. The Bible is not misinterpreted unless Reverend Peck, a northerner who moved to the South, is not enticed to use it for his own personal gain. The immorality of slavery comes from a twisted view of Christianity, which is redeemed when it is defended by great champions of the faith like Georgiana. Hopefully, one day, we will learn how to defend the Bible and Christianity from its misinterpretations as Wells Brown does. Only then can we give each other true freedom.

## Notes

1. In order to avoid confusion between Henry Box Brown and William Wells Brown, I will refer to the former as “Box Brown” and the latter as “Wells Brown” consistently throughout this thesis. All in-text citations written as “(Brown, *Narrative...*)” refer to William Wells Brown’s 1847 *Narrative*.

2. Characters in Wells Brown’s work who avidly argue for the abolition of slavery on moral grounds while avoiding Christianity include Carlton before his conversion. For examples of how abolition in the United States moved away from its Christian roots towards political, philosophical, and broadly moral reform, see Stafford, Sinha, and Buccola. For further analysis of the historical connection between religious movements in the United States and reform movements generally in the early nineteenth century, see Walvin and Cross.

3. One example of a scene that, by its very inclusion in the play, contributes to Glen and Melinda’s minor status is Act 5, Scene 2. This scene barely qualifies as an interlude, as Glen simply recites an ode to the North Star for more than ninety percent of it. Both Glen and Melinda have one opening line each to give the setting of the scene and establish that they are escaping, and then Glen closes after reciting the poem, saying, “With the thoughts of servitude behind us, and the North Star before us, we will go forward with cheerful hearts. Come Melinda, let’s go on” (39). In terms of developing Glen and Melinda’s characters and the plot of the play, this scene does nothing but confirm that Glen and Melinda are, in fact, escaping to Canada.

4. *The Escape* contains many other Shakespearean elements, including a quote from *Hamlet* in an epigraph on the title page of the 1858 edition. See Botelho.

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