

## September 16: *The History of Mary Prince, a West-Indian Slave* (1831)

>I am most interested in Mary Prince's relationship with her first family. When Prince is sold off to her second master she laments about leaving her first mistress because she sees her almost as a sister. Why did Prince develop this relationship and maintain those feelings throughout her life as a slave? Obviously her first mistress was much less cruel than Mary's later owners, but Mary was still enslaved Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Betsy. It seems that unlike Douglass, Mary does not want to gain her freedom because she dislikes being owned but because she dislikes being mistreated. I am shocked that Mary hesitates to run away when given the opportunity in England. Yes, she has nowhere else to go, but after a life time of abuse is it not human nature to run away? Would Douglass not have run given the chance that Mary had? The psychological aspect of slavery then comes to the forefront. If Mary had not been sold off and had stayed with Miss Beatrice her whole life would she have wanted her freedom? No one will know but I am tempted to say no. She does not seem to have the same slave mentality that Douglass has or any of the slaves Douglass describes. Why?

>Which master is considered worse, the openly brutal and excessively belligerent master she first had, or the second master who showed no emotion at all?

> I found the focus of this piece quite different from those previously read for class: Not only does it highlight the life of a slave in a different region of the world besides the American South (which is all I've previously been exposed to), but it helps illustrate the life of a slave through the lens of a woman. In contrast to the other writings read in class written by male authors, I found that Prince reflects more often on the many separations she was forced to endure. While Fredrick Douglass seemed eager to find freedom, even at the cost of cutting ties with his own blood relatives, Prince is hesitant to even leave the residence of her cruel 'masters' Mr. and Mrs. Woods. Overall, she seemed less confident in her ability to get by free as "as stranger in this country (England)". Is this attributed to the fact that dynamic under which she lived was different because of her sex? Or are all dynamics different and must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis? Sorry if I'm generalizing, but it seemed like to significant of a difference to avoid.

37 >Mary Prince focuses on the heart and how it is affected by the different situations. She  
38 describes the condition of the heart as a way to explain the situation. Often, she spoke  
39 about how her heart would break or burst because of the separation she was to face. She  
40 even had moments when she her "heart always softens" (105). When she speaks of a  
41 pleasant time her heart is softened. Most of the relations made to the heart were of a  
42 loss. The hearts of the slave owners were hardened and the hearts of the slaves were  
43 filled with great grief.

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46 As in, the other slave narratives, Mary Prince describes the treatment slaves as  
47 one would treat cattle or sheep and the owners are described as butchers. Many of the  
48 beatings would be done with the slave stripped naked and hung by their wrists. This  
49 reminds me of raw meat hanging in a butcher's shop. Another vivid image she stated  
50 was of the naked cattle (slaves) being spun around and examined as a "butcher would a  
51 calf or lamb he was about to purchase" (107). This image she gives sends a red flag to  
52 the people in England, the intended readers. Neither cattle nor sheep are treated as  
53 brutally as the slaves are and Mary Prince stresses the extreme brutality. She tells her  
54 story, but also the stories of others because it is the combination of her personal  
55 experiences and the experiences of those around her that shape Mary's view. Being in  
56 such an environment takes a toll on her soul and she expresses her lament by  
57 continuing to describe her heart.

58 Mary also brings up the role of religion as her sustenance. She resorts to the  
59 church to give her spiritual strength. The church is where she goes to get that spiritual  
60 energy to continue on in her distressed life. She was also taken care of by the church,  
61 and some friendly neighbors, when she was ill again with rheumatism. Mary felt  
62 privileged when she was able to attend church and this became her backbone. She was  
63 able to meet kind people in the church in England and developed a strong sense of self  
64 and of a higher being, in which she resolved to "keep down [her] fretting, and to leave  
65 all to Him" (128).

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68 >I would like to respond to the statement Prince makes: "But when they [the English  
69 people/slaveowners] go to the WEst indies, they forget God..." (128). I find this  
70 statement to contrast with Douglass' narrative because in his narrative slaveholders use  
71 religion as a means of justification for slavery. But here, Prince is saying that if God  
72 being forgotten leads to their cruelty, religion restricts the slaveholders from acting in a  
73 harsh manner. This also in a sense, shapes how each of the narrators view religion.

- > I have yet to read any narratives or even hear a lot about the West Indian slaves therefore, I found Mary Prince's narrative very interesting. I also could not help but compare her struggles to that of Douglass'.
- Mary describes her self as a toy – being bought and given to Captain Darrel's grandchild.
- Strange how Mr. Williams gets married *three months* after Mrs. William's death.
- I was shocked by how cruel Captain I---- was especially to Hetty while she was pregnant. It would seem to me that masters wouldn't want to harm a a pregnant women due to the fact that they want another slave.
- I found Mary's situation very frustrating especially when the jar broke in her hands because of its decrepit state and her master never let her live it down.
- Why did her father bring her back to her awful master?
- Unbelievable how cruel Mr. D was
  - o Beating the lame slave and throwing salt over his wounds
  - o Throwing the old woman into the prickly-pear bushes after beating her
- Why did Mary help the Master's daughter? If I were her I would have left her knowing that I would be beaten after helping her out.
- Disgusting how he ordered Mary to wash him!
- Mr. Wood's cook treated Mary like a dog: "Molly, molly, there's your dinner."
- Far worse to find out that they were making black rangers beat their own wives and daughters – it's worse than watching someone else beat your family members
- Frustrating how Mary was kept away from her husband and that Mr. Wood wouldn't let anyone purchase her freedom.
- I found it very brave of Mary to tell her story especially because she wasn't free during the time she was saying it.
- Again religion comes into play in her narrative too. Talks about God and Providence.

>This story honestly shocked me much more than Douglass's story. Mary Prince has far more tales of families being torn apart, beatings of others, beatings of herself, master after cruel master. After reading this account, it seems to me that Douglass in a sense was extremely lucky.

Which is not to say that Mary Prince wasn't extremely lucky also, to have been in England, to have known people who could help, and to be thrown out by her masters, giving her the perfect excuse to leave. It almost seems too easy.

Mary Prince's style differs greatly from Douglass's, and the difference in their education is clear. Mary's style is distinctly less eloquent and complex than Douglass's, shown in her very dramatic, innocent statements, her faith (which is not in itself a sign of

innocence, but she definitely doesn't question it much), and her simple but passionate arguments at the end of the story. And after all, the entire tale was dictated and then rid of "redundancies and gross grammatical errors." However, Mary shows an unexpected amount of bravery in how many times she speaks up for herself and her right to freedom, telling her masters when they are doing something wrong.

>What I found most interesting about the reading was this quote by Mary Prince: "...I do not like to be idle. I would rather work for my living than get it for nothing..." It's interesting for me because it shows how much the slaves desired to be independent.

>It is interesting to me, after discussing knowledge previously with both Fredrick Douglass and Richard Wright, and one of the first things in this new readings when Mary discusses her childhood saying "This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow." In Douglass's case, knowledge was what allowed him to escape, but in this instance, more similar to Wright, knowledge just meant the knowledge of suffering, and this knowledge was actually hurtful rather than helpful, and introduced one to the true imprisonment instead of freeing them. Another comparison between the authors comes in the form of wording of the stories. Douglass, having been a former slave, was supposed to write with the mannerisms that would prove he was a former slave. This memoir by Mary Prince was supposedly not changed at all from her words except to be corrected for grammatical mistakes and to make it clearer. However there is still a noticeable difference between the writing. Douglass is obviously more educated by the word usage. The final point of comparison that I can find between the two is that both Douglass and Mary cite extreme pieces of violence in their writing. The first example for Mary is the slave Hetty, who is beaten while pregnant. For Douglass it is the severe whipping of one of his siblings. The harsh accounts help the reader to truly grasp the horrors of slavery and immediately bring them to support the cause of abolition.

¶The main thing that struck me about Mary Prince's recollection is the amount of horrible beatings in it. The cruelty of the masters and the punishments they gave out were scarring. From the beating where the woman is beaten and then pushed into prickly pears so the needles would embed in the raw skin to the first starving then beating and stabbing of the man who was caught stealing food. The punishments were not only cruel and unusual, but many times had no crime to match them.

>I found it interesting how, like Frederick, Mary needed a prologue written by a white person to give her credibility. Other similarities also caught my eye, such as the common idea between Frederick and Mary that slavery ruins the masters. Another similarity I saw was how Mary was abused by the mulatto free woman, it had a striking resemblance with Frederick and Wright's problems working because of the threat of cheap labor that they posed.

>The narrative of Mary Prince has its limit in that it "pleads" with readers to improve slaves' desperate condition and sets up slaves as the object, not the subject, of emancipation. Perhaps, the narrative itself must be emancipated first: it is those white readers (masters) who are able to decide whether to allow those "poor" slaves a modicum of liberty. For example, she says, "[servants in England] have their liberty. That's just what WE (in italics in the original text) want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants, and proper time, ..." She by herself confines the degree of liberty within that of the "servants". (It is also noticable that she identifies herself with other slaves by using the word "we".) Then, would it be just fine if all slaves are well-treated?

¶Here arises a grammatical problem. The object of treatment (slaves) must be defined in a particular way (poor and ill-treated) to be qualified for fitting in the syntax of emancipation -- One does not emancipate; one emancipates SOMEBODY. That is, she cannot but categorize herself as a slave; she must remain as a slave, if she is to plead with readers to help her. It is paradoxical that one has to use the very category which one wants to abolish.

¶[2<sup>nd</sup> e-mail] After I sent you my comment, I thought about the paradox that "one has to use the very category which one wants to abolish", and I found that it is not actually paradoxical. When I examine a sentence, for example, "Mr. Desperate eventually killed himself", I find no paradox, though "killing oneself" needs a person who is killed (therefore non-existent).

¶I think, however, it is still noteworthy because the categorization is prone to some essentialist fallacy: as Mary Prince identified herself with slaves by the word "we", she ascribed a subordinate condition (being servants to their white masters) to the category of slaves. This can mislead the readers, and Mary Prince herself, into believing that freed slaves will remain submissive to white people. ; then there would be no actual emancipation -- only the word would have changed. To avoid this consequence, we must examine critically the category/identity itself.

190 >I found it interesting to delve into the idea behind the second footnote on page 107.  
191 Although, there are two different perspectives involved, the similarities between the  
192 two accounts are strikingly similar. The inhumane nature of the slave trade is, once  
193 again, noted in both recounts through the image of humans being bought and sold like  
194 animals. Not only is this mental picture unsettling, but the separation of a family with  
195 young children seems wrong on more than one level. The devastation and pain of a  
196 family torn apart truly resonates in the accounts. With this in mind, were slave markets  
197 common in America as well as in Africa? Were there markets in Africa and, if so, did  
198 they share the harsh nature of the markets in America?

199 >What struck me most about our most recent reading was the relationship that Mary  
200 had with her first mistress and Miss Betsey. Whereas Douglas had rarely spoken well of  
201 his master at all and even had fought his master at times, Mary seemed to almost hero  
202 worship and love her mistress. This was a million times more horrifying to me than any  
203 amount of beatings or mistreatment. The things that miss Betsey would say to comfort  
204 Mary about being "her own slave" and crying that they were being traded, was  
205 disgusting to me. I saw so much more haughtiness and self-righteousness in that  
206 relationship than in the master with the whip. At one point, Mary even claims she was  
207 bought for Betsey as a pet and that she loved her so. I just can't fathom that. I can't  
208 understand how anyone would behave like that even with the kindest slave owners and  
209 if these slave owners cared so deeply, why didn't they free their slaves? I was disgusted,  
210 yet at some level so interested as to how this could possibly happen.