

Revisiting Slave Narratives and Master Plots

The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel. Julia Sun-Joo Lee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 192 pp.

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<1>For readers of Victorian literature who are unaware of the vibrancy of intellectual and artistic exchange in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* offers compelling evidence of the depth of Victorian writers' engagement with the plots, images, and motifs of American slave narratives. Focusing on works by Charlotte Brontë, William Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Dickens, Lee argues that American slave narratives exerted a "shaping influence . . . on the Victorian novel in the mid-nineteenth century" (9). Lee's provocative close readings of novels and short stories are enhanced by analyses of letters, documents, and visual images. Many of the latter are reproduced in the book to great effect.

<2>Lee opens her concise study in the momentous year 1848, when Charles Dickens sent a copy of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* to his friend William Charles Macready, a famous Irish actor who was preparing to embark on an American tour. Dickens praised the narrative but ripped out the frontispiece, an 1845 engraving of Douglass by B. Bell, telling Macready that it "was such a hideous and abominable portrait" and that he feared it would prejudice Macready against the book (qtd. 3). Douglass himself detested the frontispiece and, in an article in *The North Star*, lambasted the artist for producing a racist caricature. Presented with this evidence, most readers would conclude that Dickens, an astute reader of both written and visual portraiture, shared Douglass's reaction against Bell's caricature, but Lee prefers to speculate that "perhaps Dickens was expressing repugnance not at the portrait, but at Douglass himself." She concludes: "By removing the frontispiece, Dickens was eliminating a mark of racial authenticity, an act that materially as well as substantively undermined the narrative's integrity" (8). Despite this invocation of notions of "racial authenticity," Lee later explores Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61) in ways that are balanced, nuanced, and illuminating. Focusing on the plot trajectories of Magwitch, Pip, and Joe, Lee shows how pervasively Dickens was engaged with slave narratives as a "reader, editor, publisher, writer, parodist, and critic" (129).

<3>Lee acknowledges the generative influence of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Gilroy employed the image of a ship as a "central organizing symbol" for the way that

people and ideas circulated among Europe, Africa, and the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean. Lee “proposes an alternative symbol—that of the runaway slave” (16). She notes that fugitive slaves traveled through America and Britain, disseminating abolitionist discourse and embodying “to audiences the history of Atlantic (and American) slavery” (16). Although Lee’s nomenclature is sometimes imprecise (not all black abolitionists were fugitives), perhaps the most important contribution her book makes to nineteenth-century studies is its wealth of information on the extent to which former slaves and their narratives did in fact circulate in Europe. She documents the popularity and imaginative power of slave narratives. “In a period when few books sold more than five hundred copies, slave narratives sold in the tens of thousands” (10). Black American lecturers who achieved celebrity in England included not only Frederick Douglass, who gave three hundred lectures during a nineteen-month tour in the 1840s, but also Moses Roper, William Wells Brown, William and Ellen Craft, Henry “Box” Brown, and others. They built on the successes of an earlier generation of transatlantic black abolitionists, most notably Olaudah Equiano and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. Lee argues insightfully that “the very body of the fugitive slave” constituted a “contact zone” and “traveling locus of cultural exchange” among peoples of different nations, classes, and religions (17).

<4>Each chapter in Lee’s study has significant strengths. Most of her chapter on *Jane Eyre* (1847) covers ground well-trod by other critics, but she generates a fresh, fruitful reading of Jane’s watercolor paintings in juxtaposition to J. M. W. Turner’s painting, *The Slave Ship*. In a chapter on *Pendennis* (1848-50), she analyzes Thackeray’s resolute determination to remain apolitical at the same time that he abundantly employed narrative devices, images, and metaphors related to slavery. She aptly observes, “The liberty with which Thackeray riffs upon a familiar abolitionist illustration and motto attests to the ubiquity and flexibility of visual and textual representations of slavery. It also reveals Thackeray’s almost chilling ability to detach form from political content, to treat with levity even the most morbid subjects” (71). Her chapter on Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-55) illuminates the fertile use to which Gaskell put elements of slave narratives when writing her major industrial novel. Lee closes her book with an insightful examination of anxieties about the wavering nature of British moral authority in the late Victorian era as revealed in two short stories by Fanny Stevenson that engage issues of slavery, rebellion, and Irish terrorism.

<5>Although Lee’s analyses are often persuasive, she sometimes weakens her case by overstating and oversimplifying. By restricting her gaze to the U.S. and Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, she magnifies the importance of American slave narratives while minimizing the wider circulation of peoples and ideas in the Atlantic world. Her focus on the influence that U.S. slave narratives exerted on Victorian novelists offers an important corrective to the traditional assumption that the cultural vector of influence flowed in one direction from Britain to the U.S., yet her account sometimes appears merely to reverse the cultural flow, with the result that cultural interaction still appears to be unidirectional rather than free-flowing, dialogic, and polyphonic. The story she constructs would be more fascinating had she considered, for instance, the responses of Douglass to Dickens or Jacobs to Gaskell, and had taken into account the transatlantic origins of the slave narrative as a genre. She comes close to suggesting that every Victorian representation of a tyrant, a fugitive, a victim, or a runaway is a plot device borrowed from antebellum American slave narratives. For example, she contends that Gaskell “borrows” from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-52), William and Ellen Craft’s *Running*

a Thousand Miles for Freedom (1860), or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), when writing "My Lady Ludlow" (1858) and "The Grey Woman" (1861). She offers such evidence as the fact that both Jacobs's Dr. Flint and Gaskell's M. de la Tourelle are described as "jealous," suspicious, cruel, and proprietary toward women (80). Lee mentions the French Revolution as an influence on Gaskell's representation of class relations in France but concludes that Gaskell's "cross-dressing plot" demonstrates her "debt to the slave narrative." Gaskell's "grey woman," like Ellen Craft, escapes from her oppressor by dressing like a man. Yet wives, indentured servants, and soldiers, as well as slaves, were running away from masters long before the slave narrative genre developed, and cross-dressing was a long-standing feature of literary culture, from stage productions to the career of Aphra Behn, author of one of the earliest English novels (*Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*, 1688), to the French novelist George Sand, Gaskell's famous contemporary who habitually cross-dressed. Many non-Anglo nineteenth-century writers also wrestled with issues of class oppression, slavery, rebellion, and revenge, notably the wildly popular French novelist, Alexandre Dumas, and the premier Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, both of whom had African ancestry.

<6>More engagement with extant scholarship would enrich Lee's study. In her introduction, Lee reduces the enormous body of scholarship produced by the paradigm shift called Atlantic world studies into a handful of citations. If Lee would place her work more fully into dialogue with other critics in the field and broaden her gaze to include a larger portion of the Atlantic world, her readings would grow more rigorous, more nuanced, and more persuasive. Despite its weaknesses, however, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* offers a rich array of information and ideas that will make it a rewarding read for any student of Victorian literature.