

Jourdon Anderson and the Meaning of Freedom in the Aftermath of Slavery

Robert Cohen and Janelle Pearson

A key working assumption of English teachers at the Essex Street Academy, a public high school on Manhattan's Lower East Side (and a partner school of New York University) is that literature can be taught most effectively when it is placed into historical context. Historical knowledge can help students who struggle with classic literature and find it difficult to imagine the world of a novel's protagonists, enabling them to make sense of the bigger picture, and avoid getting bogged down grappling with a novel's plot or minor themes. But since students often know little history, they tend to approach literature with few contextual clues about how to read the text. Collaboration between teachers of literature and history can yield lessons that offer students those crucial contextual clues, making classic works of fiction more accessible. This is why Essex Academy English teacher Janelle Pearson and New York University historian Robert Cohen (the authors) worked together to select primary sources that illuminated the historical issues raised by the novels that Pearson's students were reading last year. The document discussed in this article, escaped slave Jourdon Anderson's letter to his former master, was one that we selected for use as students completed their reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

This celebrated novel by Morrison is fictional, but it is grounded in the real life tragedy of Margaret Garner, an African American enslaved in Kentucky, who at the age of 22 briefly escaped with her children to Ohio in 1856. Hunted down by her master, and about to be seized by slave catchers, Garner determined that she would rather have her children die than be forced back into slavery. She killed her two-year-old daughter and was about to attack her other three children when the slave catchers seized her.¹ *Beloved* captures this tragic story and its implications about the scars of slavery

and aspirations for freedom. We wanted to find an equally powerful historical document that could evoke the legacy of slavery and the drive for freedom, but do so in a case that was more typical than Garner's tragic story. We also wanted to push the historical conversation beyond the era of slavery and into the post-war period of Radical Reconstruction so that students could see the growing African American struggle for equal rights—the crusade to build an egalitarian interracial society on the ruins of the white supremacist slave society after the Civil War.

The move from literature to history

led us from Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel to Leon Litwack's Pulitzer-Prize winning history, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*.² The letter from Jourdon Anderson to his former master is featured in Litwack's exceptional book. The letter seemed all the more appropriate for use with students reading *Beloved* because Anderson's drive for freedom, like Garner's, had landed him in the free state of Ohio and featured a memorable—though not a tragic—act of defiance towards his former slave-owner.

When we contacted Professor Litwack, an emeritus professor of history at UC Berkeley, about the Anderson letter and its significance he explained that for him it was one of the most deeply meaningful documents of the thousands he had researched in exploring the transition from slavery to freedom. It evoked the many ways in which African Americans defined, experimented with, and dared to aspire towards a new vision of freedom. In contextualizing the Anderson letter, Litwack linked it to the central historical theme he had been writing about in his book on slavery's aftermath:

When I set out to write Been in the Storm So Long, I asked a simple question: What happened when nearly four

million black men and women, who had known nothing but slavery, suddenly learned they were no longer slaves? To what could they aspire in a society where whites owned the land, the tools, the crops, and the law, and where the prospect of black freedom threatened the very fabric of Southern society? How free was free? To answer these questions required nearly 600 pages. And the answer was filled with unexpected complexity and with extraordinary drama. I wanted to study slavery at the very moment slavery came apart, when whites and blacks confronted each other in new and unprecedented ways.

Whatever the frustrations and hardships black men and women experienced after emancipation, most acted on the assumption that freedom made a difference in their lives. Freedom revolutionized black expectations and aspirations. Freed from slavery, black men and women found ways to exercise and define their freedom: they might slow down the pace of work, haggle over wages and conditions, refuse to submit to punishment, violate racial etiquette, move to a new place, locate families, pray in their own churches. What emancipation introduced into the lives of black men and women was a leap of confidence in

the ability to effect changes in their lives without deferring to whites.

Few articulated that spirit more vividly, or more clearly, than Jourdon Anderson, a former Tennessee slave. He had escaped from his master during the Civil War. After the war, in 1865, his old master asked him to return to the plantation and resume his labor. [Below] is the reply Jourdon Anderson dictated and sent.³

Seeing the Anderson letter as representing a surging struggle for black self-determination in the aftermath of slavery, Litwack concludes: *How many Jourdon Andersons came out of slavery remains difficult to determine. In 1865, we know*

Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865

To My Old Master, Colonel P.H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Col. Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this....

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here: I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children, Milly, Jane and Grundy, go to school and are learning well; the teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday-School, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated; sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks, but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Col. Anderson. Many darkies would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again....

Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly—and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget

and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages has been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die if it comes to that than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood, the great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

P.S. Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me. From your old servant, Jourdon Anderson⁴

that many former slaveholding families found their place overrun with black men and women who were determined to work under conditions that would in no way compromise their newly won freedom. What happened to that spirit and to that determination would profoundly affect race relations and this nation for the next century.

*The history of the struggle for black freedom includes some of the bleakest examples of terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and dehumanization in the history of this nation. But, as Jourdon Anderson demonstrated by his actions and demeanor, this is also a story of extraordinary resiliency, the story (as historian Nathan Huggins wrote) of “a people who had to endure and make choices under conditions and circumstances which are outside our experience to know... whose courage was... in their insistence on holding themselves together, in acting, speaking, and singing as men and women.” It is a story of resistance, defined not so much by spectacular feats and insurrections as by day-to-day acts, employing various forms of expression, often subtle and individual, sometimes overt, communal, even incomprehensible.*⁵

A Homework Assignment:

Since the Anderson letter is so lucid and eloquent—and so sure to draw a student response in the emotionally-charged ways that it combined anger, humor, sarcasm, and defiance—evoking both the scars of slavery as well as the promise and joys of emancipation, we did not see the need for lengthy instructions or a detailed introduction to the document. Much as Litwack did in *Been in the Storm So Long* when he published the letter verbatim, we wanted to allow Jourdon Anderson to speak for himself. This meant assigning the letter to be read initially by students individually as homework with just a few guiding questions.

We asked the students to read Jourdon Anderson’s letter carefully, underlining the lines of the letter that stood out and seemed the most moving and interesting. Students then had three options. They

could write a poem, present a monologue, or write a brief (one page) essay on what freedom meant to Jourdon Anderson. The students were asked to think about the mood of Anderson’s letter and to try to evoke it in their poem, essay, or monologue. To insure that the poems were linked to the letter, students were asked to include lines from the letter in their poems.

Student Work: The Meaning of Freedom

Students had no difficulty seeing that the letter found Jourdon Anderson expressing in diverse and deeply felt ways how much freedom meant to him. The letter, as one student, Brandon, put it:

made me wonder what made Jourdon feel free. [I] noticed how Jordan constantly repeated his family and their education... [and] also how great he was doing being free. I assume that Jourdon feels that the meaning to be free is your opportunity to have an education and being able to protect [your family] and their opportunity for an education. It looks like having an education opened many doors for him which gave him the confidence to stand up for himself and also to... [send] this [defiant] letter to his former master.

Sheree, another student, was most impressed by the material issues, that, since under slavery Anderson had to work for years without pay, for him freedom meant being justly compensated for his work. And she picked up on his sense of pride at receiving fair wages as a free man, noting that in his letter, Anderson, by mentioning his earnings, was showing his former master “he is accomplishing” in Ohio “what a slave couldn’t do...”⁶

The issue of personal safety was highlighted in some of the essays, which equated freedom with physical safety. Although the issue of sexual abuse may seem sensitive, the students in this high school class of juniors and seniors had

no difficulty discussing its relationship to the slave system in ways that were both historically accurate and emotionally mature. Robert, another student, noted that sexual abuse of slave women by masters “was not at all uncommon,” which is why it was not surprising that Anderson alluded to it in his letter. Under the slave system there were no legal protections against such abuse. So the presence of such protections in Ohio was, in Robert’s view, an important aspect of freedom as Anderson implicitly defined it. “Freedom is,” Robert concluded, “feeling safe and knowing that your loved ones are safe.”

The students in their essays, poems, and monologues also noticed and seemed moved by the tone of Jourdon Anderson’s letter—that the letter’s significance as a freedom document came not only from what Jourdon was saying but *how* he was saying it. They mentioned its sarcasm and defiance, and, without expressing it explicitly, understood that this lack of deference in the letter was another expression of Jourdon Anderson’s newfound sense of dignity, a way in which he was exercising his freedom, finally being free to call his former master to account for exploiting his slaves. This, Aaron contrasted with Colonel Anderson who seemed unable to understand the freedom ethos of his former slave: “The colonel was literally a tyrant... [who] oppressed all those under his power... The colonel is really pathetic to ask Anderson to work for him again.”

Class Discussion

Several of the poems were read out loud by students as we began our class discussion of the Anderson letter and the quest of African Americans to test and expand their newfound freedom as they emerged from slavery at the Civil War’s end. With such titles as “The Price of Freedom” and “No Turning Back” the poems as well as the monologues—with students reciting Jourdon Anderson’s most emotionally powerful lines—personalized this history, showing what was at stake for African Americans as individuals, family members, and citizens



This artwork (*The Modern Medea*) depicts the story of Margaret Garner, who escaped from slavery in Kentucky with her four children. She killed one child and wounded the others rather than have them be returned to slavery. 1867 (Original painting by Thomas Noble)

as they struggled for their rights in the post-Civil War South.

The class then reviewed Jourdon Anderson's letter to insure that its insights into both slavery and freedom had become clear to all of the students. We linked this letter with other primary sources. These included the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives in which other former slaves recalled the moment when they learned that they were free and discussed what freedom meant to them. We also read together some ads from black newspapers (also cited in *Been in the Storm So Long*) which showed that even decades after emancipation former slaves were searching for relatives who had been sold away and lost to their families under slavery.⁷

We discussed how the 14th and 15th Amendments and the founding of public schools and black colleges in the South represented related expressions of this idealistic crusade for new freedoms and opportunity during Radical Reconstruction. But we ended the session by exploring how this venture in interracial

democracy would be cut short by the white supremacist resistance to change—which manifested itself in the rising racist terror of the Ku Klux Klan, culminating in the violent overthrow of Radical Reconstruction in the late 1870s and the establishment of an apartheid regime in the Jim Crow South by the turn of the century. This was why historian Eric Foner spoke of Radical Reconstruction as “America’s Unfinished Revolution.”⁸ It would take a second Reconstruction, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to topple Jim Crow and fulfill the freedom dreams of the former slaves, freedoms that Jourdon Anderson articulated so memorably in his time that almost a century and a half later they still resonated with our students.

Contextualizing *Beloved* through the Jourdon Anderson letter helped students’ writing come alive in their final papers on Toni Morrison’s novel. Their reading of this letter fostered discussion about the meaning of family and community for African Americans under slavery, and this in turn facilitated a deep understanding of the role of family and community

in *Beloved*. Once students began to reflect on the dismal realities of slave life—that marriages were not recognized under slavery; that the law did not protect slaves from sexual abuse by their masters; or that slave-owners, by selling slaves, could tear apart slave families and communities—the whole context for the tragic story told by Morrison came into focus. 📖

Notes

1. On Garner, see Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).
2. *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize in literature in 1988. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* won the Pulitzer Prize in history in 1980.
3. Leon Litwack email correspondence to Robert Cohen, March 1, 2011.
4. Jourdon Anderson’s letter was initially published in the *Cincinnati Commercial* and re-printed in the *New York Tribune*, August 22, 1865. See, Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 333–335, 596, n90.
5. Litwack email to Cohen, March 1, 2011.
6. All the student work cited here and below are from the papers and poems written by Janelle Pearson’s English class, Essex Academy, Essex and Grand Streets, New York, N.Y.
7. On these ads, see Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 232.
8. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2002).

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