

Enslaved

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 25, 2013](#) issue



SLAVE ODYSSEY: Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is brutally treated by his owner, Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). © 2013 FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Americans are not eager to revisit the history of slavery. Black liberation theologians in the tradition of James Cone have long called racism America's "original sin," and one sign of sin is the sinners' inability to see it.

Twelve Years a Slave pulls no punches. It is a relentlessly brutal film about slavery. As a white southerner, I found myself objecting: surely it can't have been as bad as this all the time.

But these horrors happened, and we have yet to face them squarely. Filmmaker Steve McQueen, who lives in Amsterdam, wanted to make Solomon Northup's classic memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* as well known as Anne Frank's book about another holocaust.

The figure of Northup is played by the magnificent British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor. When we meet him he is a free African American living in Saratoga, New York, in the early 1840s. He is a musician and engineer, with two children and an honored place in society. On a business trip to Washington, D.C., he is kidnapped and enslaved. His

name is changed, and he is sent south to be sold. When he protests the mistake, he is beaten savagely. Northup is reduced from wearing top hat and tails to washing naked in a mixed-gender courtyard. He is now treated as chattel.

As a slave he works for a relatively gentle master, William Ford, played by the perfectly accented Benedict Cumberbatch. A woman purchased with him is forcibly removed from her children and wails ceaselessly. (“Don’t worry, you’ll soon forget them,” the planter’s wife icily reassures her.)

When Northup shows Ford how to float timber downstream rather than haul it overland, he is rewarded with his own fiddle, which draws the ire of overseer John Tibbeats (Paul Dano, playing a character as twisted as the one he played in *There Will Be Blood*). Northup fights back when the overseer beats him and is strung up, toes barely touching the mud, gurgling and choking for air for what seems like hours. Ford has to sell his slave to get him away from Tibbeats and reluctantly does so to the even more savage Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender): “He fancies himself a nigger-breaker,” Ford warns.

Epps live up to his reputation. He has slaves whipped for not picking enough cotton. He wakes them in the middle of the night to dance for his sick pleasure. His wife openly tortures Patsey, a young woman he regularly rapes.

In the film’s most terrible scene, Epps forces Northup to whip Patsey until her back is flayed from top to bottom. Her offense? She’d gone to another plantation to get soap, which Epps’s wife had withheld as a petty punishment. Lupita Nyong’o, a Mexican-born Kenyan actress, educated at Yale, debuts as Patsey and has drawn Oscar buzz. I defy you to watch this scene and ever forget it.

And then suddenly the story is over. A Canadian with abolitionist leanings (played by Brad Pitt, a producer of the film, whose appearance here is distracting) turns up, the facts of Northup’s identity are revealed, and he is released. As critics have pointed out, there was no such rescue for the vast majority of slaves.

The film is masterfully and extravagantly shot. The gorgeous Louisiana bayou and endless Spanish moss serve as a peaceful backdrop for the savagery. The musical score aligns with the terrifying scenes on screen. This is a beautiful film of something unspeakably ugly.

St. Paul promised that baptism meant the undoing of distinctions between slave and free. There is religion in this movie—slave masters quote biblical commandments,

slaves sing spirituals, and patterns of the King James Bible permeate speech. Americans have long been a religious people for whom the very ubiquity of the Bible robs it of its power. Perhaps a Hollywood film by a British-born director can help us confront our history and realize again the true power of Christian belief.