



UNIVERSITAT DE  
BARCELONA

---

**Grau d'Estudis Anglesos**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**2020-2021**

***Twelve Years a Slave:*  
Slavery through the Eyes of Solomon Northup and Steve McQueen**

**Student: Marta Fernández Jimeno**

**Tutor: Rodrigo Andrés González**

Barcelona, 17 de juny del 2021





### Declaració d'autoria

Amb aquest escrit declaro que soc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18 del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 17 de juny del 2021

Signatura:

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my tutor, Rodrigo Andrés. During our first meetings, his feedback, his ideas, and his way of addressing the topic were immensely useful for me to give the paper a different and interesting approach. He also gave me the confidence to trust in the process, to trust in me, and that I was perfectly able to write this work.

I also want to thank Joanna Cuevas for letting me interview her. Thank you for giving me your voice and thoughts, this work really needed them. Thank you for your direct, clear and sincere answers. They have offered me a new way of seeing and perceiving your story, your experience, the one of the black community.

Of course, I want to thank Alba Zaplana, my best friend, whom I met in this degree. Always by my side and sharing together this stressful and intense path that has been writing this paper.

And I obviously want to thank my parents. Their daily support, love and confidence in me have always been there, and always will be.

This paper is the result of four years of happiness, thank you.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>2. BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL</b> .....	3
<b>3. CHARACTERS' AND SCENES' ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON</b> .....	5
<i>3.1. Characters' analysis and comparison</i> .....	5
3.1.1. Main characters.....	5
3.1.2. Minor characters.....	10
<i>3.2. Scenes' analysis and comparison</i> .....	11
3.2.1. Original scenes.....	11
3.2.2. Invented scenes.....	16
<b>4. ANALYSIS OF SOME IMDb'S REVIEWS ABOUT THE ADAPTATION</b> .....	20
<i>4.1. Characters' adaptation</i> .....	20
<i>4.2. Dealing of slavery</i> .....	22
<i>4.3. Adaptation of the novel</i> .....	23
<b>5. ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER</b> .....	26
<b>6. CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	30
<b>7. WORKS CITED</b> .....	32
<b>8. ANNEX</b> .....	33

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The period of slavery in the United States has always been an issue of great interest for me. This huge and savage system, which ruled a significant part of the country for hundreds of years, is the responsible for the death of millions of lives during those centuries. Fortunately, there were people who were able to denounce this abomination through their narrations and experiences. In the second year of my degree, I studied one of these authors, Frederick Douglass, and it is because of him that I decided to devote my final paper to the issue of slavery in the United States.

Since the beginning, it was clear that I wanted to compare a slave narrative with films such as *Django Unchained* (2012) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013), because my main interest was focused on the level of accuracy between these narratives and films placed in that period. However, the chosen option was to compare and analyse the novel *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) with its adaptation, since it was the perfect opportunity to discover whether Hollywood had achieved a loyal and plausible result, or instead, whether the film was just a poor copy of the book without any kind of essence or emotion.

First, I have decided to introduce the reader into the world of slavery by giving some background of the epoch. It is important to consider when was the novel written and how did the country politically and socially function at the time. Then, the main section of this work is devoted to the analysis and comparison of the novel and the film. I decided to select several characters and scenes to observe whether they had undergone any type of modification. Undoubtedly, it has been one of the most interesting sections to write because I got to know better the characters, to empathise and understand them. Besides, the section of the scenes' analysis allowed me to appreciate how important are the invented scenes, as it will be explained further below.

The work also includes two more sections which are related to the principal one. The first one is a contrast between my previously given opinion on the adaptation and the reviews of some users of IMDb, a platform that offers all kind of information about thousands of films. I really enjoyed that part because as I had read the novel and seen the film, it was very useful for me to take into account all those different opinions. How could the same picture be perceived so differently among the audience? The second and final section is the most special. I wanted to give a voice to the black community, and the best way to do it was through an interview. The topic of it was the influence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement on culture, specially on cinema. For a long time, I had been very interested in the fact that many films that dealt with

the same issue, racial conflict, had been released in the last few years. Why? Why all this boom now? Hence, my idea was to interview a black woman who is a friend of mine, Joanna Cuevas, to hear her opinion and transmit it to the readers. Honestly, I believe that the paper would not have made any sense and would not have been the same without her opinion.

All in all, with this work, I intend to establish the level of accuracy between the Solomon Northup's slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and the adaptation by Steve McQueen. In consequence, my purpose is also to explore the impact of the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the seventh art.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

The relevance of *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) resides in the fact that it was published before the Civil War (1861-1865), a historic event which entailed the abolition of slavery in all the estates of North America. Previous to that, slavery had been legally practised in the country for more than two hundred years.

The slave trade started when the United States were still known as the British colonies of the New World. In the early 17th century, the first ships came from Africa, and they would “import” black people to be used as labour for the hard work in plantations of tobacco, cotton, sugar... This practise lasted until the American War of Independence (1775-1783), when the colonies became states independent of Great Britain, and slavery, supposedly, came to an end. Actually, it was abolished in the north states, but it continued in the south ones because, having essentially an agricultural economy, the major income of white people derived from their plantations’ profits, and black people were their perfect means for maintaining such plantations.

At some point, North America was divided between free and slave states. In the 1840s, there were thirty states, and half of them were slave ones; these were: Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, Arkansas, Florida and Texas. Black people’s lives were completely different depending on the state they lived. Freedom was, of course, the principal distinction, and all the north states were abolitionists, they did not support slavery and what it implied.

Solomon Northup spent twelve years of his life enslaved in Louisiana, in the Red River region. He was a free man, a musician from Saratoga, New York. He had the documents which gave credit to his freedom, but these could not impede the hell he lived, as they were stolen from him when he was drugged and captured. As previously mentioned, Louisiana was a slave state, thus, the laws established there did not protect him at all. Black people were considered and treated as property, with no agency, freedom, or rights. Their lives were limited to working tirelessly to the point of exhaustion, even until death. They performed other activities too, such as cooking, taking care of the house or whatever the master or mistress ordered them to do. Once a man or woman was captured or was born a slave, the possibilities of escaping that situation were almost minimal. Even if they managed to escape, as the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) stated, if they were found by other masters, overseers or any other person, they had to be taken back to their master, who brutally punished them for their rebellion.

Fortunately, the universe gave Solomon Northup a second opportunity, and the life he had given up for lost returned to him. This was what made possible the creation of *Twelve Years a Slave*, a slave narrative that relates the miserable life of Solomon under enslavement's abominations. He published it a few months later after his liberation, and, an interesting fact is that he did not write it. David Wilson, a white lawyer, was the man in charge of writing his experiences. Contrary to what could be believed, he did not manipulate or distort Solomon's words; as he states at the very beginning, "My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage." (Northup, p. 5).

During that epoch, many other important works that denounced the horrors of slavery were published. Frederick Douglass published in 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe published the widely known and read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852; in fact, *Twelve Years a Slave* is dedicated to her. All of these novels, along with many others, contributed to the increase of the abolitionist movement and, nowadays, are considered the essentials of the slave narrative.

### 3. CHARACTERS' AND SCENES' ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

#### 3.1. Characters' analysis and comparison

After having read *Twelve Years a Slave* and having watched its adaptation by Steve McQueen, I was surprised to notice that some characters had undergone some modifications. Some of them had been exaggerated and some others had been softened. Of course, that did not mean the film was bad or that the characters were inaccurately portrayed; but it was definitely an issue which had to be addressed. Nonetheless, there are characters which have been pretty well adapted and are almost the same as in the novel. This is why the aim of this section is to examine and compare the characters of both novel and film in order to establish the similarities and differences between them.

##### 3.1.1. Main characters

###### - **Solomon Northup:**

There is not much difference between the real Solomon and the one played by Chiwetel Ejiofor. He is one of the neuter characters, he barely suffers any modifications. Both are kind, polite and hard workers, both love their family very much and it is what motivates them to stay alive. Both empathise with vulnerable people and are always trying to help and protect the rest, specially Patsey. They are tenacious and hopeful too, because they never stop thinking about the way of escaping during their whole captivity, family is their motor. Moreover, both find peace and comfort in music, in playing the fiddle; it is their way of forgetting the hell they live in, and also it is a tool to earn some money. They also find this comfort in religion, they trust in God's will and believe that He will help them. Both are skilled carpenters too, but are not good at harvesting cotton. All in all, Solomon's character is pretty well adapted in the film, his essence is kept and there are no modifications to be found.

###### - **Edwin Epps:**

His reputation precedes him, he is known as one of the most brutal masters of the region, who is proud of being a 'nigger breaker'. He keeps the slaves under inhumane conditions, even worse than animals. He is depicted as a man with a notorious lack of education who gets drunk almost every week. Throughout the whole novel he does not show a shred of humanity towards the slaves; he just thinks on his benefit, nothing else matters to him. As Solomon says, "He could have stood unmoved and seen the tongues of his poor slaves torn out by the roots—he could have seen them burned to ashes over a slow fire, or gnawed to death by dogs, if it only brought him profit. Such a hard, cruel, unjust man is Edwin Epps." (Northup, p. 120). Not only

he subdues them to daily whippings, but also humiliates them by making them dance to entertain him. Of course, the dancing mood is way better than the beating mood when he comes home after having been drinking all night. Money is what motivates him and he considers the slaves his property, the animals that harvest his cotton. In the end, he even admits that if he had known about Solomon's liberation, he would have hid him to keep him as his slave. Racism is so interiorised in him that he never shows any kind of regret for what he does, he just thinks they deserve to be treated with such brutality because only violence will civilise them.

This is just a tiny depiction of Edwin Epps's personality. I have to admit that even before watching the film, it was difficult for me to imagine Michael Fassbender playing such a repugnant role. But, actually, what was really difficult for me to understand was that people like Edwin Epps, terribly heartless, did ever exist.

Indeed, the character is softened in the film; as it is affirmed in *History vs Hollywood*, "(...) the real Edwin Epps was crueler than actor Michael Fassbender portrays him to be in the movie." Here, the character does show that he has feelings, that he is humane. Of course, this is seen in very few scenes and, surprisingly, such scenes are the ones where he is with Patsey. For instance, the film shows a rape scene of Epps to Patsey but, leaving aside the obvious fact that rape is something horrible, we can go beyond and notice that there are some differences between both Epps. The real Epps, does not feel bad for what he does because, as he says, he can do whatever he wants with his property, he does not consider her equal to him. The Epps played by Fassbender is different; in the scene, he momentarily believes that Patsey is unconscious, or even dead, and, surprisingly, he worries so much. After slapping and choking her, he realises she is alive and starts crying, but some anger can be noticed too. This can be read as if Epps felt guilty for having feelings and worrying about Patsey, an inferior being, and the way of getting rid of them is through violence. The same happens in the whipping scene. Epps is about to brutally whip Patsey but, at the last moment, the look in his eyes demonstrates he is incapable of doing it. The real Epps does it without hesitation, because his relationship with Patsey that is described in the book is purely abusive; he never cares about how she feels, he just uses her body to get pleasure, either by beating or raping her. Furthermore, Fassbender plays a more comical Epps too; the fight with Solomon, in which he falls in the mud with the pigs and then stumbles over the fence falling flat in his face, shows how dumb and clumsy he can be, and, sometimes, those characteristics made his appearance look less threatening than the real Epps.

- **Samuel Bass:**

Although Bass appears almost at the end of the narrative, the Canadian carpenter is essential to Solomon's liberation. Brad Pitt interprets a very accurate version of him, it is one of the characters that does not undergo any modifications either. The abolitionist principles of the real Bass and the one from the adaptation are what define them, both are portrayed as loyal and noble men. Both do always speak their minds, they do not fear what the others will say because, as Solomon says, "He was that kind of person whose peculiarity of manner was such that nothing he uttered ever gave offence. What would be intolerable, coming from the lips of another, could be said by him with impunity." (Northup, p. 177). This can be seen in the discussion he has with Epps about enslavement. Furthermore, he is devoted to end slavery, he will do whatever it takes to help Solomon and return him his freedom.

- **Mistress Epps:**

In Solomon's words, "Mistress Epps was not naturally such an evil woman, after all. She was possessed of the devil, jealousy, it is true, but aside from that, there was much in her character to admire. (...) She was kind to all of us but Patsey - frequently, in the absence of her husband, sending out to us some little dainty from her own table." (Northup, p. 130). As it can be noticed, she is generally described as a nice woman who is polite with the slaves and cares for them, but she cannot control herself when it comes to Patsey; she blames her instead of blaming her husband. But, as Solomon says, that behaviour is only focused on Patsey, probably because she perceives her as a threat to her marriage. Besides, Solomon also believes that if Mistress Epps had been born in the North, she would be even nicer and she would not have tolerated how slaves are treated by her husband.

Her presence in the novel is not that relevant as in the film, she just plays the wife role. However, in the adaptation she has more authority over the slaves and she even confronts Epps on several occasions; she does not stay in silence as any wife of the epoch would.

However, McQueens's adaptation does accentuate her wickedness, not only with Patsey but also with the rest of the slaves. Sarah Paulson embodies a colder and crueller Mistress Epps, she possesses a gaze of hate and superiority towards all the slaves during the whole film and never shows mercy. Unlike Epps, who shows some humanity at some point, she remains impassive before any kind of situation. There are several scenes which show the maltreatment Patsey receives by her. She does not allow her to eat while the others can, she scratches her face with anger in front of everyone and also throws a heavy bottle of whiskey to her face; basically, Patsey's skin is marked by the sick jealousy of the mistress. On the other

side, as previously mentioned, she also shows that mean behaviour to other slaves. For instance, there is a scene in the film where she sends Solomon to buy some “goods and sundries”, and in that conversation she asks him whether he can read, when he is in the middle of his answer she interrupts him saying “Don’t trouble yourself with it. Same as the rest, master brought you here to work, that’s all. Any more will earn you a hundred lashes.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 63). That sharp answer does not belong to the Mistress Epps from the novel, a more kind and warm one. It also shows that here, in the film, she is not that different from her merciless husband.

- **William Ford:**

William is the first master Solomon has and the only one who treats him well. He simply adores him and he is convinced that Mr Ford forms part of the system of slavery because of his environment, if he had been born in the North, he would be against it, for sure. To Solomon, “(...) he was a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession.” (Northup, p. 57), and “His was no heavy hand crushing us to the earth. He pointed upwards, and with benign and cheering words addressed us as his fellow-mortals, accountable, like himself, to the Maker of us all. I think of him with affection, and had my family been with me, could have borne his gentle servitude, without murmuring, all my days.” (Northup, p. 65). Both statements clearly show how kind, compassionate, and how different from the rest of masters Mr Ford is. He is like a father to the slaves, because he considers them as family; that is why all of them respect and appreciate him. Furthermore, he protects Solomon on many occasions and defends him from other men who want to hurt him or even kill him. However, Solomon never tells Ford where he really is from and that he is a free man.

On the other hand, the adaptation of this character presents some modifications. As *History vs Hollywood* states, “The movie paints William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) as a hypocrite, contradicting his Christian sermons by overlaying them with his slave Eliza’s agonizing screams.”, meaning that he is kind and does not use violence, but he is still a slaver who keeps people under their will. In the adaptation, Eliza argues with Solomon about that, she does not agree with him, she considers Ford as cruel as any other master because he is part of that system and perpetuates it. Besides, the last scene, where Solomon and William Ford appear together, is quite revealing. As it has been mentioned, while in the novel Solomon never tells anything about his past to William, in the film he does it. He tells him the truth, that he was not a slave and that he is from New York. Ford’s answer, surprisingly, is “I cannot hear that.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 53), because he knows that it is a crime to enslave a free man. Hence,

instead of helping him to recover his freedom, he decides to turn a blind eye and sell Solomon to Epps; he practically abandons him when troubles appear. At the end of the day, Solomon is still a nigger and William Ford is a white master, a slaver who will not put his life and his family at risk for such nigger.

- **Patsey:**

Although the real Patsey is described as “(...) a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence.” (Northup, p. 123), in the adaptation, Lupita Nyong'o interprets a sadder Patsey. Maybe the intention of the director was to transmit the constant suffering of the girl because of the miserable life she lives. In fact, in all the scenes she appears, she is always with a look of resignation, a dull look. Furthermore, there is an invented scene in the film where she asks Solomon for help to die; she cannot stand her life any more, “I got no comfort in this life.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 79), she confesses. In the novel, her ambition is to escape, she does not want to die because she has more energy and strength than the character of the film. Also, the film shows more accurately how her relationship with Mr and Mistress Epps is. The abuse she receives from both is explicitly shown. Epps truly believes that she is his property, that she is a “Nigger among nigger. God gave her to me.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 57), and Mrs Epps is constantly beating her or looking at her with hate.

- **John Tibbeats:**

Tibeats is one of the best adapted characters, not only his physical appearance but also his personality. He is described as a “(...) small, crabbed, quick-tempered, spiteful man. (...) not esteemed by white men, nor even respected by slaves. He was ignorant, withal, and of a revengeful disposition.” (Northup, p. 65). Indeed, Paul Dano perfectly embodies him in the film. He does transmit that timorous sense Tribbeats possesses. For instance, he is always angry and cruel to Solomon but, when the slave whips him in self-defence, he completely changes and begs for mercy. Ashamed of having allowed a slave to beat him, he swears revenge and does not stop until Solomon is sold to Epps. Then, in a scene where Solomon is giving an idea to Ford, he is so jealous that tries to discredit him by saying “Are you an engineer or a nigger?” (McQueen, 2013, min. 36), which shows how ignorant he is. Besides, Ford gives him a disdainful look, which proves that he really is not respected by anyone.

All in all, through this comparison and examination it can be observed that there are characters that have been softened, others that have been exaggerated and others that have been very accurately portrayed. These changes are the ones that differ the novel from the adaptation,

probably to make it more visual, dynamic and shocking to the audience. Nevertheless, the essence of the novel is still kept and the film does transmit the original aim Solomon had, to condemn slavery through his experience.

### 3.1.2. Minor characters

There are some characters which are not as relevant as the ones previously analysed, but their presence, either in the novel or the film, provides many details and information which are useful to get a wider view and different perspectives of how slavery was for everyone in that epoch. I have categorised them between the ones that hardly appear in the novel, which is only one, but that have pretty relevance in the film, and those that do appear in the book but are not in the adaptation.

**Harriet Shaw** belongs to the first group, she is the black wife of a white man and is friends with Patsey. Her story is never told in the book. In the adaptation, according to *History vs Hollywood*, “Director Steve McQueen wanted to give Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard) a voice.”, and that is why there is an invented scene where she is able to explain how her life is. While in the book the reader just knows that she is a black woman married to a white man, in the film it is shown the importance of her role. In her new status, Mrs Shaw is free from violence and slavery; furthermore, she believes it is a “small and reasonable price” to have an adulterous husband if the reward is to live a comfortable life, without suffering. She says: “I ain’t felt the end of a lash in more years than I can recall. I ain’t worked a field neither. Where once I served, now I have others serving me.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 68), and that is what truly matters to her. She has suffered so much that she prefers a life without love to a life with daily violence.

In the second group there are many more characters. For instance, **John Manning** is a white sailor who risks his life by sending a letter for Solomon to help him to escape. Through him, it can be observed how not everyone in the South supported slavery.

Another interesting character is **Miss Mary McCoy**, Solomon describes her as a “(...) lovely girl. (...) She is beloved by all her slaves, and good reason indeed have they to be thankful that they have fallen into such gentle hands.” (Northup, p. 190). She is the example of a white person that is part of the system because she was born in the South, but that she is also kind and good-hearted. It is a similar case to William Ford’s.

Quite the opposite is **Peter Tanner**, a master Solomon has who uses the Bible to perpetuate and justify slavery; he manipulates its words to scare the slaves and make them believe that they deserve what they are suffering. It can be seen then, how religion was wrongly

used in the slavers favour: “(...) Tanner was in the habit of reading the Bible to his slaves on the Sabbath, but in a somewhat different spirit. He was an impressive commentator on the New-Testament.” (Northup, p. 82).

**Young Master Epps** is another character that does not appear in the adaptation, but that perfectly portrays how racism can be transmitted from a generation to the following one. He is a boy who has been raised in the slavery system and that will, for sure, take his father’s lead.

Finally, we have **Celeste** and **Lew Cheney**, two black people. Through her, the reader can get to know better the situation the runaways were under. She asks Solomon for some food for several months, and one day he never sees her again; perhaps she escaped or, probably, she was returned to her master. The story of Lew Cheney is quite disappointing; he organises a rebellion and then betrays his companions in order to save his life and gain the trust of white people. This shows how racism would divide the community and make them distrust, betray and fight each other. Desperation was so great that they were capable of doing anything if that kept them alive.

All these individual and secondary stories are what shape and define the situation the United States was in. All these realities demonstrate that there is not a singular way of living slavery, there are thousands of it, all of them with their own nuances.

### *3.2. Scenes’ analysis and comparison*

Same as with character’s analysis, I have selected some scenes in order to examine them in depth and observe whether they have been modified in the adaptation, whether they also occur in the novel, whether they are useful to introduce interesting information... Again, the purpose of this section is to establish the level of accuracy between the novel and the adaptation through an analysis of the plot.

#### 3.2.1. Original scenes

##### - **Solomon’s sale:**

This takes place in chapter six, when Solomon is sold to William Ford by Theophilus Freeman in a slave pen in New Orleans. In the novel, Solomon provides detailed information about how this process was: “(...) we were required to wash thoroughly, and those with beards, to shave. We were then furnished with a new suit each, cheap but clean. (...) We were now conducted into a large room in the front part of the building to which the yard was attached, in order to be properly trained, (...) The men were arranged on one side of the room, the women

on the other. The tallest was placed at the head of the row, then the next tallest, and so on in the order of their respective heights. (...) Freeman charged us to remember our places; (...) During the day he exercised us in the art of “looking smart”, and of moving into our places with exact precision. After being fed, in the afternoon, we were again paraded and made to dance. (...) while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.” (Northup, p. 47-48). This description clearly demonstrates the level of humiliation black people were under when being enslaved; they did not have any kind of agency or privacy, they were sold and treated like animals. In addition, this chapter also deals with the sorrow of Eliza, a mother who is separated from her children, Randall and Emily. Her situation is an example of what usually happened in slave’s sales: many families were separated and never saw each other again, the majority of the customer’s did not care about it, they just bought what they needed or what they could afford, and if that meant breaking a family, they would do it anyway. William Ford is an exception; he decides to also buy Emily as well as Eliza and Solomon to keep them together, but Freeman’s inhumane answer is that “There were men en enough in New-Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be, rather than not get her. No, no, he would not sell then. She was a beauty — a picture — a doll — one of the regular bloods — none of your thick-lipped, bullet headed, cotton picking niggers (...)” (Northup, p. 53).

McQueen’s adaptation perfectly portrays this sense of degradation that slaves were exposed to. It is almost surreal to watch the scene because it is even more exaggerated and shocking than in the novel. In it, the slaves not only have to wash together but also have to do it while the white customers observe them, no privacy is allowed. They are literally displayed, waiting to be bought as if it were a market; they are motionless and completely naked. They cannot say a word, they cannot complain, all that they can do is be quiet and show their capacities and skills. Freeman, interpreted by Paul Giamatti, has the same attitude as in the novel, he is only interested in money and sales, for him, black people are just simple goods. It is quite disturbing the way he makes Randall jump in front of a customer, as if he was selling a horse, the way he “describes” the qualities of every slave, how he touches their bodies to demonstrate their strength and health or how he makes them show their teeth. These are some details that do not appear in the novel but that, certainly, increase and exaggerate the audience’s already low conception of slavery. Finally, the contrast between the screams of Eliza for her loss, and the cheerful music Solomon is compelled to play creates a sense that everything that

is happening in the slave pen has to be silenced, and music is the tool to do that. As long as the music keeps playing, no one is doing anything bad.

- **Patsey's whipping:**

Although the adaptation of this scene is quite accurate and does transmit the horror Solomon witnesses by seeing Patsey in that situation, there are tiny details which make the difference between the novel and the film.

In the first, Solomon describes it as "(...) the most cruel whipping that I ever was doomed to witness - one I can never recall with any other emotion than that of horror (...)" (Northup, p. 168). After being absent for a couple of hours, when Patsey returns, Epps is waiting for her with great anger and jealousy. He accuses Patsey of having been with Mr Shaw, to which she replies: "Missus don't give me soap to wash with, as she does with the rest, and you know why. I went over to Harriet's to get a piece. That's what I went to Shaw's for, Massa Epps, the Lord knows that was all." (Northup, p. 168). But he, blinded by rage, does not believe her and tells her she is a liar. Right after, "(...) he ordered four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. (...) he ordered her to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each firmly tied to a stake." (Northup, p. 170). Solomon is ordered to brutally whip Patsey and he cannot refuse to do it because, if he does, the consequences for him will be even worse. After several strikes he intends to stop but, Epps is not satisfied, he "(...) was yet furious and savage as ever (...)" (Northup, p. 170). He never shows any kind of remorse during the whole whipping, he is totally merciless. Meanwhile, Mistress Epps stands "(...) on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction." (Northup, p. 170). In the end, Solomon cannot stand that any more, and refuses to keep whipping Patsey; so, Epps decides to do it himself with "ten-fold greater force" than him until "the mere exhaustion". This scene, without the shadow of a doubt, clearly shows the most grotesque and revolting side of slavery. Its detailed description, that narrates how lacerated is Patsey's body and how her blood was running over her, produces on the reader a sense that, what happens, goes beyond human nature, that such actions have to be in the devil's name. Since that day, Patsey is never the same, "The burden of a melancholy weighed heavily on her spirits. (...) There was no mirthful sparkle in her eyes that formerly distinguished her. The bounding vigor - the sprightly, laughter-loving spirit of her youth, were gone." (Northup, p. 172).

Regarding the film's version, it does keep the grotesque and brutal essence but, however, there are some details which have to be taken into account. For instance, when Patsey is missing, Epps, in his obsession for her, starts looking for her very worried but angry too; he cannot imagine her with another man but him, she is his property. He says: "She gone. My Pats is gone." (McQueen, 2013, min. 106). Also, unlike the novel, it is not Solomon who starts the whipping but him, but before doing it, Fassbender's Epps shows a look of remorse, of being incapable of hurting Patsey that way. Instead, it is Mistress Epps who plays the cruel and inhumane role, "Do it. Strike the life from her." (McQueen, 2013, min. 108) she says, but he refuses and orders Solomon to do it instead. Once he is whipping Patsey, the mistress, who wants to quench her hate and see the girl suffer to death, says "He pantomimes. There's barely a welt on her." (McQueen, 2013, min. 109), she manipulates Epps to get what she wants, and that is why she says "That's what your niggers make of you, a fool for the taking." (McQueen, 2013, min. 110). This, obviously, makes Epps feel more inferior and insecure and, thus, he forces Solomon to whip her harder; here, the music prepares the audience for the violence they are going to witness and it transmits Solomon's impotence of having to do something he does not want to. As in the novel, Epps ends up whipping Patsey himself and while he is doing it, Solomon says: "Thou devil! Sooner or later, somewhere in the course of eternal justice, thou shalt answer for this sin!" (McQueen, 2013, min. 112), to which Epps replies "Sin? There is no sin. Man does how he pleases with his property." (McQueen, 2013, min. 112). He has completely transformed, the little mercy he could possess has vanished and has become rage and brutality.

- **Discussion between Bass and Epps:**

In the nineteenth chapter, Samuel Bass appears and, as previously mentioned, his presence determines Solomon's future. Apart from that, during his stay at Epps's house, while he works as a carpenter, he also shares his opinion about slavery with everyone and that is why all the people in the region know him as "the abolitionist". For instance, both the novel and the film narrate a discussion between Bass and Epps on the subject of slavery. The first tries to convince the second about how wrong is slavery by saying: "I have seen niggers before now as good as I am, and I have no acquaintance with any white man in these parts that I consider a whit better than myself. Now, in the sight of God, what is the difference, Epps, between a white man and a black one?" (Northup, p. 178), but it is useless; Epps has racism so interiorised and normalised that his answer is: "All the difference in the world. You might as well ask what the difference is between a white man and a baboon. Now, I've seen one of them critters in

Orleans that knowed just as much as any nigger I've got." (Northup, p. 178). Bass, patiently, still tries to convince him: "There are monkeys among white people as well as black. I know some white men that use arguments no sensible monkey would. (...) These niggers are human beings. If they don't know as much as their masters, whose fault is it? They are not allowed to know anything. You have books and papers, and can go where you please, and gather intelligence in a thousand ways. But your slaves have no privileges. (...) They are held in bondage, generation after generation, deprived of mental improvement (...)" (Northup, p. 179). However, nothing changes; the more Bass tries to convince him, the more Epps laughs at him.

In this discussion, the differences between abolitionists and slavers can be observed; such differences would lead to the American Civil War. While Bass represents the North, Epps represents the South.

In the adaptation's scene, as it is affirmed in *History vs Hollywood*, "Much of what Bass (Brad Pitt) says during that scene is taken almost verbatim from the book, (...)". Nevertheless, the scene presents some changes, especially at the beginning. At the moment that Bass shows his disconformity on how Epps treats his slaves, the master's answer is "They ain't hired help. They're my property." (McQueen, 2013, min. 103), he does not consider them as labourers but as animals. Bass asks again: "What right have you to your niggers when you come down to the point?" (McQueen, 2013, min. 103), and Epps replies "I bought them. I paid for them." (McQueen, 2013, min. 103). Thereon, the dialogue is practically the same as in the novel and their discussion ends in the same way; Epps laughs at Bass's arguments and his only response is "You like to hear yourself talk Bass, better than any man I know of." (McQueen, 2013, min. 104). He does not take any part of the discussion seriously, and he never will.

- **Beginning and ending of his slavery:**

Finally, two interesting scenes to compare are the ones that narrate his first and last encounter with slavery. In the novel, the first one takes place after Solomon being drugged and kidnapped; "I do not know, but when consciousness returned, I found myself alone, in utter darkness, and in chains." (Northup, p. 18). He is very confused, full of questions and does not understand why he is in that horrible place: "Where was I? What was the meaning of these chains? Where were Brown and Hamilton? What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a dungeon? I could not comprehend." (Northup, p. 18). He is very disoriented and, of course, very afraid because inevitably, as time passes, the fear of having been enslaved is confirmed. Besides, he feels impotent because he actually was a free black man who had with him the documents that protected him, but now these are useless and will not save him from slavery.

He believes: “It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly.” (Northup, p. 19).

On the other hand, the last day of Solomon’s captivity when Henry B. Northup comes to rescue him, his reaction is: “I looked in the direction indicated, and as my eyes rested on his countenance, a world of images thronged my brain; a multitude of well-known faces (...) all the scenes and associations of childhood and youth; all the friends of other and happier days, (...)” (Northup, p. 202). For the first time in twelve years, he experiences the possibility of achieving freedom, of reuniting with his family and leaving that hell. He is asked some personal questions to prove that he really is Solomon Northup and, finally, he is set free. However, before leaving, he talks with Epps one last time; he is very surprised to discover that Solomon was a free man from New York, and also very furious because he wants to know who has written the letter for him. Besides, he swears that if he had known that Solomon was going to be rescued, he would have hidden him.

In the film, the first scene previously examined is even more astonishing. As soon as Solomon wakes up and is aware that he has been chained, he immediately tries to get rid of the chains with absolute desperation. Meanwhile, the music gives the scene a sense of tension and concern. Even though I had read the novel first, this scene was very distressing and impressive to me.

Solomon’s rescue in the film is very emotional, more than in the novel. He is working in the fields when he is asked to recognise a man that is supposed to be Henry B. Northup but that in the adaptation is called Mr Parker. His face changes completely when he notices who he is and, suddenly, a look of hope can be seen in his face. As in the novel, he is also asked in some personal questions to confirm his identity. Epps reaction here is quite exaggerated; while the novel presents a confused and furious Epps, in the film, he shows rage and anger since the beginning. “My nigger, my bussiness.”, “Who authorized you to interfere with my property?” or “I own you. You belong to me.” (McQueen, 2013, min. 122-123) are some of the last words he says to Solomon. In addition, this scene also presents the farewell between Solomon and Patsey; it is hard for him to leave her because they have known each other for ten years, but now it is time to come back home.

### 3.2.2 Invented scenes

The adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* also has some added scenes, which do not appear in the novel, but that are interesting because they are useful to explore more in depth

the situation of slavery in the United States. Therefore, as the scene of the conversation between Solomon and Harriet Shaw, and the scene where Patsey confesses to Solomon her will to die have been already examined, the rest of invented scenes in the film are the following:

- **Solomon's memories:**

While Solomon is translated from the slave pen of Washington DC to the one in New Orleans, a memory of his life is introduced. In this scene, the audience can see how it was before becoming enslaved, and it also notices, through the music, how happy he was back then, living a normal and free life. He is freely walking around the city with his family, they do not have to be afraid nor do they have to stay alert for their safety. Suddenly, a black man appears and stares at them, as if he could not believe what he is seeing, as if the possibility of being black and free was an illusion to him. Solomon and his family enter into a shop and the owner, who is white, warmly welcomes them. Life in the North has nothing to do with life in the South; white people do respect black people because all of them are the same, they are citizens and human beings, no distinctions are made. The man, called Jasper, enters the shop, apparently with the intention of talking to Solomon but, before he can utter a word, he is interrupted by his master, who apologises to Solomon for the "intrusion", and is forced to leave the establishment.

The aim of this scene is to express the differences that were among black people even in the northern states; while some still served the whites, just a few meters away, others had the luck of being free and living a normal life.

- **The failed escape:**

Solomon is on his way to buy the goods Mrs Epps has ordered him to bring, he is alone, no one is watching him, no white eye is upon him. Inevitably, he realises that it is the first time in many years that he actually has the possibility of escaping, so he starts running. In this sequence, the music transmits to the audience the great tension and adrenaline Solomon is feeling. After a few minutes, he suddenly runs into a group of white men, and what he sees behind them paralyses him. There are two black boys with ropes around their necks. One of the men tells him to come closer and asks him where he is going to. "On my way to Bartholomew's. Sent by Mistress Epps." (McQueen, 2013, min. 64), he answers, to which the white man replies: "You best get there, then. Get there quick." (McQueen, 2013, min. 64). Solomon, almost unable to move or speak, leaves the place and passes by the two boys, who look at him with their eyes crying for help, as if he was their last hope. The last image the audience has is the boys being hanged behind Solomon.

What this scene shows is the unfairness of the system and how black people's lives were easily taken; there were no consequences for the murderers because the law did not protect the slaves. They did not pay for the crimes they committed, and they were completely free to do what they pleased with black people because no one would defend them. Besides, the scene also shows the situation that Solomon could face if he decided to escape, and that is why he does not dare to try it again for the rest of his enslavement.

By far, it is one of the most horrifying and shocking scenes of the film for me.

- **An intimate encounter:**

Actually, there are any references regarding Solomon's sexual and affective life, probably because he remained faithful to his wife during his captivity or because he decided to keep it as a secret; we will never know. In this scene, while he is trying to sleep, he has a sexual encounter with a woman who gets pleasure from him. The thing is that, as *History vs Hollywood* says, "(...) the flash-forward scene that unfolds early in the *12 Years a Slave* movie is entirely fictitious and was created by director Steve McQueen and screenwriter John Ridley. "I just wanted a bit of tenderness—the idea of this woman reaching out for sexual healing in a way, to quote Marvin Gaye. She takes control of her own body. Then after she's climaxed, she's back where she was. She's back in hell, and that's when she turns and cries."". Hence, this woman was not only looking for pleasure but also for human touch, for some minutes away from solitude and misery. This scene shows how the huge lack of affection and love of the slaves affected them and made them so desperate for any kind of warm gesture, because all they received were whippings and insults.

- **Abram's funeral:**

This scene never occurs in the novel because, in fact, Uncle Abram does not die. In the adaptation, while he is working in the plantation, he suddenly dies from exhaustion, as many slaves did. After saying a few words about him, the slaves gather together and start singing *Roll Jordan, Roll* a common spiritual among the African-American slaves. In this sequence, it can be observed the union of the black community and their traditions, specially, it is focused on the southern one, those who have not met freedom. Solomon, a man from the north, does not know this genre and its songs but, at some point, he joins the rest of the slaves and starts singing because, even though he might not feel that integrated with the southern black people and their customs, he does share the feeling of sorrow, impotence and injustice for Abram's death. Hence, the addition of this scene in the film is interesting because, as the novel does not

delve into the habits of the southern community, the audience does get to know them through McQueen's adaptation.

After having analysed both types of scenes, original and invented, it also can be said that some of them have been softened or exaggerated. Besides, the fact of adding scenes that do not take place in the novel, provides the film a sense of realism because they are pretty well chosen, they are not a capricious decision of the director in my opinion. As someone who has consumed both products, novel and film, it can be said that the adaptation does portray accurately the miserable experience of Solomon Northup during his enslavement.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF IMDB'S REVIEWS ABOUT THE ADAPTATION

It needs to be considered the fact that in the previous sections the analysis and comparison between the novel and film of *Twelve Years a Slave* has been elaborated under my personal opinion. Hence, the aim of this section is to research and transmit the opinion of the rest of the audience; in particular, I will be focusing on the users of IMDb. My purpose here is to examine some good and bad reviews on the adaptation and contrast them with my own analysis. My interest here is to get to know the great variety of opinions the platform offers, from ratings of ten stars to ratings of one, and, specially, the reason for such ratings.

I will divide the analysis of the reviews in three categories:

##### 4.1. *Characters' adaptation*

Regarding the ratings of ten stars, I have found that many different users praise the acting and adaptation of the novel's characters. The majority of the main characters are said to be very real and credible, that they truly seem to belong to that epoch. For instance, DarthVoorhees argues that "We empathize with Solomon because Eijofor instills within him a great deal of intelligence and dignity. (...) Eijofor's body takes punishment in horrendously violent scenes but it is the scenes of mental torture which are almost more angering. To see Northup being talked down to and berated as a stupid animal is horrible.". For this user, the actor has been able to portray and transmit the suffering of the protagonist, the suffering of the black community. Then, a user called ronakkotian gives his opinion on the performance of Michael Fassbender as Epps: "Fassbender brought out the sadistic and menacing nature of Edwin Epps perfectly. I don't think I've despised a character so much."; well, I do not entirely agree with him. It is true that Fassbender's character is sadistic, violent and repugnant. However, as I argued in my previous analysis, I believe that the real Epps, the one in the novel, was even more merciless and inhumane than Fassbender's. Probably, this is because the user might have not read the novel, so he cannot compare both characters. Also, the secondary but important character of Mistress Epps is analysed by Dfschohr-532-549658, who says: "Sarah Paulson gives an equally cruel, yet brilliant performance as Fassbender's demented wife."; I totally agree with him, she is even more mean and cruel than in the original novel. Another user, Camelot\_2000, says "This is a beautiful and honest movie, even made more so by Lupita Nyong'o's riveting performance as a tortured slave who comes to believe that death is more welcoming than life. It's no wonder she won an Oscar for that." I also agree with this opinion because I believe that she perfectly portrays the role of Patsey and everything it entails; her suffering, her strength, her vulnerability... All those characteristics are embodied by Lupita

Nyong'o. However, Patsey is also described as a cheerful girl too, and that characteristic does not appear in the adaptation.

Basically, all the opinions agree on the fact that every character keeps the needed credibility, that there is no exaggeration or lack of intensity in them. Their performances are perfectly accurate and provide the film a huge sense of realism. This can be appreciated in the review of thamanidalgardo-822-410218, who confesses: "History had its way with me (I am an African American woman). Thank you Mr. McQueen, Mr. Ejiofor, Ms. Nyong'o, Ms. Paulson and others, and yes, even Mr. Fassbender."

On the other side, the great controversy among the ratings of one star was the one about the portrayal of white people in the film. A lot of users made reference to this subject in their reviews; one example is the opinion of ajtlawyer, who states that "(...) every white character in this movie is portrayed as the very embodiment of evil. No nuance, nothing but unremitting sadism. (...) The slave masters in "12 Years a Slave" don't have the slightest hint of anything human about them, just treating people with cruelty for cruelty's sake." I do not really know what to think about this, I mean, I agree that the majority of white characters in the film are portrayed as the 'enemy', as the oppressors. But maybe this was made on purpose by the director to exaggerate and make clear the situation that black people experienced in the hands of the white ones. It is true that there are barely two or three white characters in the whole film who are kind, but we need to take into account that the major part of the adaptation takes place in a plantation owned by a racist and mean master and in a region where every family owned slaves. This subject is also supported by another review of a user called nellie-english, who said: "Surely it is as patronizing and insulting to assume personality is dependent on colour as it is politically correct. At least the same cannot be said of gender, the white women are as evil as their male counterparts." In the last part of the review she is definitely referring to Mrs Epps. Moreover, "A fact that was never mentioned in the movie either; over 80% of the population in the south never owned a slave. I guess they wanted to portray the 20% as the majority."; this datum given by bloodroses75 shows his disconformity on the possible inaccuracy of the film. Maybe, what the user is criticising is that the adaptation follows very stereotypical patterns, while the northern people are cultured and civilised, the people in the south are completely the opposite and, of course, entirely racist.

The performances of the actors and actresses were also discussed. Again, returning to the controversy of the portrayal of white people, max\_tout argues that "By his own account, William Ford was a decent man, though a product of the time he lived in, and his background. He was not portrayed as such in the movie - I'm guessing because this did not fit the

screenwriter/director's literal black and white vision of his tribulations.” In this case, I agree with the user because I also believe that the character of Mr Ford was modified in the film, I already affirmed that in my own analysis. He was presented as a kind man who has to be part of the only system he knows, and in the film he is presented as a hypocrite. The character of Brad Pitt, Samuel Bass, is questioned too; as john-948-585660 says, “Brad Pitt's monologue was embarrassing and amateur.”; he is also accused of playing the white hero in many reviews. Perhaps, those people who think that, would have changed their minds if they had read the novel and see that if it was not for Bass, Solomon probably would have died being a slave. There are opinions about Patsey too. “She was the weakest of the cast and her acting was over dramatic to the point of nausea.”, states eliza\_gaskell. I do not share her opinion because Patsey’s character is overdramatic because her life is miserable, and that misery is excellently portrayed by Lupita Nyong’o. Finally, another interesting review by eliza\_gaskell too, is: “I reckon the book is better on character development and empathy.”. She is one of the few people who had read the novel and is able to give an opinion comparing both products. Undoubtedly, she has made herself clear and she does prefer the novel.

#### *4.2. Dealing of slavery*

One of my main interests while researching opinions was how the subject of slavery had been perceived by the audience. To me, the conclusion is that McQueen not only provides the point of view and experience of slaves but also includes many other perspectives, specially through the invented scenes, like the one where Harriet Shaw appears. In the ratings of ten stars, there were many opinions which thought the same: “Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about 12 Years a Slave is the way that it portrays slavery itself. Instead of taking the easy way out and limiting his exploration of the topic solely to the slaves, Steve McQueen increases the scope and we see how it affects those who profited by it.”, says Backfire83. Also, many users believed that the subject had been addressed in a very real way, that the violent, suffocating and degrading essence of slavery had been kept. Hence, as LetwitJr affirms, “Films exploring themes of slavery are few and far in between and never has one been quite as exhaustive and effective as this one. Beautifully shot and edited, the film features moments of tension, heartbreak and a few laughs here and there. Steve McQueen has created another masterpiece.”. ScottGentry does also agree with the previous opinion and it can be observed in his review: “The film is at times extremely brutal, but delivers a completely honest insight into slavery and the effects it had on our society.”

But, of course, we also need to consider the ratings of one star. The majority of them were focused on two issues: an overdose of sadism and historical inaccuracy. In the first one, many users agreed with the fact that the only intention of the director was to shock the audience with gory and morbid scenes. For instance, dude2010 argues that “(...) instead of making the movie multi-dimensional, deep and engaging, the story-tellers "communicate" the story through brutality and violence, as if someone on the face of the earth needs a proof that slavery was bad, and as if slaves were used nearly only as punching bags by sadistic white people.” It seems like the general impression of this audience is that Steve McQueen does not go beyond the obvious, that he just tells us what we already know. Another similar opinion is the one of tony-949-596463, a user who feels “that the producers were conducting more of a display of slavery's cruelties, rather than getting us immersed in the travails of the victims so we could really empathize with them and even more recognize the evils of slavery.”

Regarding the second issue, there was also some controversy among the reviews. Some of the complaints were about the fact that the film presented, as previously mentioned, such a stereotypical depiction of the northern and southern states. Indeed, the adaptation does present them as opposites. In the section of invented scenes, my analysis on the scene about the life of Solomon prior to his captivity, it can be seen how safe was life in the north, while in the rest of the film, in the south, the only thing the audience perceives is danger. “For god's sake, this ridiculous depiction of how the northern states of the US was an idyllic utopia for black people (and only the nasty evil south was racist) is not even true NOW in 2014!” affirms ryko25. Also, bloodroses75 believes that this is not the indicated film to learn about slavery and black history, that it is completely inaccurate and distorted: “If you want to learn about black history and what happened during the times of slavery, this movie is not the place to go to. Find a proper history book and learn for yourself instead of this director's skewed view of events that transpired then.”

#### *4.3. Adaptation of the novel*

As a person who had read the novel and watched the film, I was also really interested in the accuracy of the adaptation of Solomon's story and everything it implied. The opinions were many, and, again, I searched among the best and worst ratings so here are my conclusions.

To start with, namashi\_1 was pretty satisfied with the final result: “An adaptation of the eponymous 1853 autobiography by Solomon Northup, '12 Years a Slave' is A Near Masterpiece! Steve McQueen's Gut-Wrenching Direction, The Unforgettable Performances & A Screenplay So Brave & Arresting make this recent critical darling, A Winner All The Way!”

To this user, every aspect of the film is perfectly approached. A different opinion is the one from loriforonda, who admits that despite not having read the book, he/she perceives the realism of the film and does feel the essence of the novel: "I had never heard of Solomon Northup before I watched this movie, so I'm not sure how historically accurate certain events and individuals were portrayed. I do know that some of the scenes were so intense and brutal that I just couldn't look away. At the end I was "ugly" crying. I will not soon forget this dramatic historical depiction of slavery and how it affected both the slaves and those who thought they had the right to own them." Also, Reno-Rangan believes that the film is accurate in the proper way, no more no less. He argues: "It was a good adaptation, but the dialogues were very weak. There's no strong lines said anywhere in the movie or any memorable and rememberable. I believed the movie transformed exactly as the book says, I mean the original edition one. This movie is not appreciable for its contents because it was evil full, but for bringing back the truth to today's audience. It was knowledgeable hard work for the cast and crew." He basically thinks that it can be the perfect option for getting introduced and learning about that period of the United States.

Considering the ratings of one star, many of the users believed that the adaptation was extremely basic, that the plot had not gone beyond. The general feeling is that a story that could be told in twenty minutes, is told in two hours and a half. For instance, nellie-english argues that "The director is clearly eager to get to the gory bits though, and within the first ten minutes Solomon has been kidnapped, enslaved, and the audience is cringing under a close up of his contorted face during a twenty minute whipping scene; the first of many to come." Honestly, I do not agree with this review because, actually, by the end of chapter two, Solomon has already experienced all that nellie-english says. I just think that Steve McQueen decided to go straight to the point, just like the novel. If this user had read the novel, perhaps her opinion would have been a different one. The same happens with nigel-denning-2. He also believes that the plot is very basic and that some parts of it do not make sense: "So, basically, man gets kidnapped, lives as a slave working for three different "Masters", witnesses hard work and unfair treatment of slaves including murder and rape, and eventually gets to go home after writing a letter to a friend who comes and picks him up. Hardly noteworthy at all, and in my worst five films of all time." Again, the only thing the director is doing is being loyal to the original story, so I truly believe that, in this case, there are no mistakes to be found. Finally, an interesting review to take into account is the one by edmundbartonpm, who states: "I was fortunate enough to have read the ghost written biography prior to seeing the film adaptation, and am glad I did. (...) The movie is a great big serve of white guilt depicting people completely differently to the author.

The movie went as far as to make villains out of people the book spoke kindly of. I strongly encourage everyone to read the book and be astounded at how different the story lines are. There should be a disclaimer at the start indicating that this is loosely based on fact and is in no way a historical record.” Well, I agree with him in some points, but I do not think that the adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* by Steve McQueen is that different from the original novel as he assures.

All in all, after having analysed the wide variety of opinions and having contrasted them with mine, it is evident the fact that some of them have impressed me because I did not agree, but I also was glad to see that many users believed the same as me regarding some aspects. It has been interesting to observe how different the perception of a film can be depending on the person. Besides, it is also worthy to mention that while the section of the ten-star ratings had two hundred and eighty-one reviews, the section of one-star ratings had only thirty reviews. Just to take that datum into account...

## 5. ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

In this last section, my purpose is to talk about the issue of BLM and the great impact it has had upon society and culture. After having been thinking for a while how to approach it, I came to the conclusion that the best way of doing it was through an interview to a black person, because my opinion about this subject was not that useful or interesting as theirs. Therefore, Joanna Cuevas, a friend of mine, has been the chosen person and I truly believe that her opinion will be very interesting to take into account.

First, I wanted to give Joanna the space to express what is BLM for her, it was the best way for me to start the interview. The answer was clear and direct: “(...) black people have always resorted to themselves when it comes to claim their equality: no one else would speak on their mournings back then, and they decided to hold onto each other, and nothing has changed ever since.” That is how she conceives it, as a movement of union, where everyone supports everyone, they do not act separated, they protect each other.

Another question that I was curious about was related to the movement’s trigger, how and why did it emerge. Of course, all these years, I have been aware about the movement but, as a white person who does not suffer racism, discrimination or assaults, hence, is not completely updated and involved in the situation, it was difficult for me to trace the exact origin. According to Joanna, “(...) the movement was practically silent and purely an online discussion until Michael Brown was killed in 2014, when it evolved into a street protest. I believe it was how Brown’s case was handled what really started BLM, as his body remained in the street, facing down and uncovered, during hours. The delay on the resolution and the removal of his body from the concrete incited the black community to speak for themselves.”. I honestly did not know about this fact, and I perfectly understand that such an indictable action entailed this whole movement.

My interest was also on the spreading of this movement around the world. For instance, as Joanna says, “Ever since Brown’s death’s uproar and how it was revealed some of the information the newspapers were spreading which was misleading and suspiciously tainted to preserve the police’s reputation, people resorted to group chats to get the truth. From there, the movement grew on.”. Besides, “(...) the BLM movement has never had any problem gaining popularity among the media, as it has always been their main platform to spread updates and organize themselves.”. Nevertheless, it has to be considered the fact that “It is different, though, how the movement’s resolutions were spread onto Europe, as we do not experience the same

problems Black people suffer about in the US.” It is obvious that racism is much more present in North America than in Europe, that the brutality black people suffer is much higher there. Therefore, the movement will be much more present and strong there, not here.

Now, the rest of the questions will be related with the influence of BLM upon the cinema. To start with, a fact that has been catching my attention for a while is the significant boom of films during the last decade that deal with the racial conflict. Until that time, some films had been made in the 20th century, for instance: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *The Color Purple* (1985) or *Malcom X* (1992). However, this has nothing to do with the tremendous amount of films that have been released in the last few years. Why now? Was it a taboo at the time? Was it considered a delicate matter to address? In Joanna's words, “(...) the reinforcement of the equality by any means is the main answer to such big of an awakening of black films.”, and “(...) most activists had to clarify the beliefs they fought for, which was not an easy task. What other way could they have taken other than creating films about their history?” The answer is clear, the cinema is the best tool to give visibility and denounce the injustices that black people suffer; so, the more films, the more visibility and support. Besides, “(...) representation inside the film industry also encourages black aspiring artists on to believe they can feel joy creating more stories of the black conflict and proudly share their work, which may have been rejected or looked upon on other circumstances.”

Also, in the attempt of trying to establish a precedent to this boom of films, I asked Joanna whether *Django Unchained* (2012) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013) had promoted such boom because these two films were previous to the awakening of BLM. Her answer was: “Quentin Tarantino and Steve McQueen, respectively, may have not heard of the movement's proposal yet, but they had had years to analyse similar conflicts through their country's history enough to interpret their films through a pro-BLM reading.” Another question related to Tarantino's film was the one about its controversy. As it is known, the director's films are known for its violence and brutality, and the idea of combining these characteristics with the Afro-American slavery of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly quite risky. According to Joanna, “(...) critics have interpreted his vision thinking it came from a racist belief, but that type of brutality needs to be shown for us to remember how we, as a community, had fought, how we had resisted, how much strength was needed only to survive.” I was personally very interested about her answer, and I do agree with her that despite Tarantino's gory violence, people need

to face the suffering of the black community and be aware of the hell they all lived in those times, and today, of course.

As we are talking about cinema, we need to devote a question to the Academy's awards. In the last few years controversy has always been served. Considering the fact that in five years three films, which addressed the racial conflict, won the Oscar for the Best Picture, I could not help thinking whether this was a strategy of the Academy to earn the sympathy of the black community and of the audience, or that they really thought that these films were the rightful winners among all the nominees. For instance, comments like "(...) but, no, lets be politically correct and avoid being labelled racists, lets give the Best Picture to a mediocre, sadistic film about slavery." by dude2010, or "Can we keep from giving the movie a top star rating because we have "white guilt?"" by tony-949-596463 in IMDb, show this 'strategy' that I am referring to (the comments are in reference to *12 Years a Slave* (2013)). Focusing now on Joanna's opinion, she says: "I think they all deserved recognition, yes, but I daresay the organization has something to do with it as well."; meaning that it is undeniable that the Oscars give these films the visibility they need, but that in some cases the Academy might play this strategy. However, in the case of *Moonlight* (2016), Joanna is clear about it: "(...) it was Jenkins' opportunity that night, I must say." Furthermore, despite that in some cases the Academy might have rewarded some films to avoid being labelled as racist and to show that they do support the black community, Joanna believes: "I cannot find any issue on taking advantage of the movement as the Oscars have tried, as it has given the black conflict a closer step into power at the end of the day." This is what matters to her, that the movement keeps spreading, and the Oscars are the perfect means for it.

Finally, the last question that I posed to Joanna made reference to the fact that some films that deal with the racial conflict are directed by white people. Here, her opinion was very interesting to me because, initially, I would feel that those people are appropriating an experience that is not theirs, that they do not have the sufficient sensibility to narrate that story. However, Joanna's answer was: "As a black woman myself, I encourage wholeheartedly sharing and appreciating black material when it comes to art, as it has been boldly pushed to the shadow. We have not had any voice or representation until a few decades ago, (...)" No matter who directs it, what matters is that now, black people are able to tell their stories, they have a voice; sometimes through black people, but others through the white ones, and that is fine too. Besides, "Even though we had fought for a change, there has always been a hierarchy on how much of an impact a film director can achieve, and I do not believe the black community

has the same voice as others yet.” The black community needs to be supported and understood, and if that implies letting a white director, who will reach a wider audience, direct this kind of films, why stopping it? Basically, as Joanna affirms, “Even if it was not on their place to deal with struggles they have not experienced, the power placed on their names is enough to spread awareness and reach a common goal: clearing the path for black directors in the future and, certainly, sharing our story in a way that will resonate on the audience. That is enough help.”

Indeed, after having gone through her answers, I can surely affirm that her voice and her opinion were essential in this paper.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Summarising, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from this paper.

Regarding the analysis and comparison of the characters, it is indubitable that the adaptation has modified some of them. For instance, Mr Epps has been clearly softened, the humanity he does not possess in the original story, at some point, does appear in the adaptation. Characters like Mr Ford or Mistress Epps have been exaggerated, they are more kind and warm in Solomon's narrative. And Lupita Nyong'o's Patsey has been modified too, as the character of the film is a sadder one. Moreover, minor characters like John Manning, Miss Mary McCoy or Peter Tanner, who do not appear in the film, should be considered too. Their figure in the novel is what provides the little nuances that the film does not have.

As for the scenes' analysis and comparison, the same happens. Taking the scene of Solomon's sale, it is quite exaggerated if we consider how it is originally described in the novel. This, as previously mentioned, might be due to the director's intention of shocking the audience and made them face the suffering the black community lived. Also, the invented scenes play an important role in the film because they offer perspectives of slavery that, otherwise, would not have been appreciated. Indeed, Steve McQueen's choice of adding them was completely accurate.

The section devoted to the examination of the user's reviews about the adaptation lead me to interesting conclusions too. I decided to divide it in three categories because it would be better to compare and contrast such reviews with my personal opinion. In the category of the characters' adaptation, the users that gave the film a good rating believed that the performances had been quite real and accurate. However, there was a great controversy among the one-star ratings. Many of them showed their disconformity on the fact that almost all the white characters in the film were portrayed as entirely racist and mean. The second category had its controversy too. While some users argued that the issue of slavery had been exquisitely addressed, others said that the film was just a sadistic, violent and morbid adaptation. Besides, they also believed that it was historically inaccurate. Finally, in the last category, the opinions were also divided. Some users affirmed that the adaptation was quite credible and that it maintained the novel's essence, but others labelled it as a basic and plain copy of the original story. There were some of them that even had read the novel and considered that it was not worthy to see the film.

In the last section, the interview to Joanna Cuevas, the drawn conclusions are very interesting. For instance, that equality is essential to keep making films about the racial conflict,

that the extreme brutality of Quentin Tarantino is necessary to make white people understand the experience of black people, that the visibility the Oscars give to these films is determinant for its spreading, and that it does not matter the skin colour of a director, what matters is the message, and this message, the story of the black community, needs to be spread through all the possible means.

All I have left to say is that I honestly believe that my purpose with this paper has been achieved. I have delved into the world of slavery and it has been quite an interesting, intense, and nourishing journey.

## 7. WORKS CITED

- *Bibliography*

*12 años de esclavitud (2013)*. IMDb.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/reviews?sort=helpfulnessScore&dir=desc&ratingFilter=10>

*12 años de esclavitud (2013)*. IMDb.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/reviews?sort=helpfulnessScore&dir=desc&ratingFilter=1>

*12 Years a Slave (2013)*. HISTORY vs HOLLYWOOD.

<https://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/12-years-a-slave.php>.

History.com Editors. (2009, November 12). *Slavery in America*. HISTORY.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>.

Northup, S. (2012). *Twelve Years a Slave*. (H. L. Gates, Ed.). Penguin Books.

*Pre-Civil War African-American Slavery*. The Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/national-expansion-and-reform-1815-1880/pre-civil-war-african-american-slavery/>.

- *Filmography*

McQueen, S. (2013). *12 Years a Slave*. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Regency Enterprises, River Road Entertainment, Plan B Entertainment.

## 8. ANNEX

Interview to Joanna Cuevas:

- **What is BLM for you? How do you conceive it?**

When it comes to me, the reason the Black Lives Matter movement emerged was due to the lack of representation of the voices of the African-Americans in the US, and a way to reinforce the grounds to create a tighter community.

Ever since the approval of the Jim Crow's laws and the determination set on to segregate black from white people, there has always been a sense of familiar tightness onto the African-American community. Having had an ongoing battle for years represented as a united pack, such as how it resulted during the Civil Rights movement, black people have always resorted to themselves when it comes to claim their equality: no one else would speak on their mournings back then, and they decided to hold onto each other, and nothing has changed ever since.

The BLM movement, despite that, did not work as a rebellion at first: the protests mourned the deaths of the fallen men and encouraged black people to accept the way they were seen among police department and crime justice, raising awareness of the system's racism.

- **Do you think that there was any trigger that promoted this movement? Any event, film, song...? Basically, how and why do you think it emerged?**

It all started when, during the last decade, the black community started noticing the increasing number of African-American deaths under the hands of the police department, specially towards black men, and the lack of importance, justice and voice those cases were given.

There were a few deaths which gained support through the "#blacklivesmatter" hashtag on a Facebook post, such as the Trayvon Martin's case on 2012, for instance, but the movement was practically silent and purely an online discussion until Michael Brown was killed on 2014, when it evolved into a street protest. I believe it was how Brown's case was handled what really started BLM, as his body remained in the street, facing down and uncovered, during hours. The delay on the resolution and the removal of his body from the concrete incited the black community on to speak for themselves.

In my opinion, that was their last straw and, thus, the beginning of a fight against racism in the US since MLK's death and the end of the Civil Rights Movement.

- **When did you start to notice its spreading and presence among the media?**

For me, I believe, it was not until the movement started gaining popularity overseas during 2017. Even Alizia Garza, the creator of the first Facebook comment involving the hashtag, must have thought it was a one-time event and, in fact, that it was not going to help any of the victims' families.

It is different, though, how the movement's resolutions were spread onto Europe, as we do not experience the same problems black people suffer in the US. The movement was an immediate answer to stop systematic racism, as there has always been traces of hostility no one dared to have a conversation about, and I do not think anyone outside the African-American community can contemplate having an opinion on the subject, having not experienced the same.

Of course, however, the BLM movement has never had any problem gaining popularity among the media, as it has always been their main platform to spread updates and organize themselves. Ever since Brown's death's uproar and how it was revealed some of the information the newspapers were spreading which was misleading and suspiciously tainted to preserve the police's reputation, people resorted to group chats to get the truth. From there, the movement grew on.

- **In the last decade, a huge boom of films about the racial conflict has emerged. Why now? Why so many films about this subject in only a few years? What do you think this is due to?**

Of course, the reinforcement of the equality by any means is the main answer to such a big awakening of black films. From the way I see it, it was important to clarify what the BLM organization was fighting for passionately, as non-black people did encounter themselves talking about systemic racism for the first time after the movement gained popularity, not too long ago. Not too long before that, people were aware of how mistreated the black community had been, surely, but most activists had to clarify the beliefs they fought for, which was not an easy task. What other way could they have taken other than creating films about their history?

Moreover, representation inside the film industry also encourages black aspiring artists on to believe they can feel joy creating more stories of the black conflict and proudly share their work, which may have been rejected or looked upon on other circumstances.

- **Do you think that films like *Django Unchained* (2012) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013) are a precedent to all these films and that they also promoted this boom?**

In a way, yes. Even though one must say the Black Lives Matter movement was created around 2014, black people have been fighting onto reaching the exact same goal ever since the Civil Rights movement appeared in 1954. Quentin Tarantino and Steve McQueen, respectively, may have not heard of the movement's proposal yet, but they had had years to analyse similar conflicts through their country's history enough to interpret their films through a pro-BLM reading.

- **Could films like *Django Unchained* (2012) be made nowadays? Would they be considered politically incorrect?**

There has been a lot of fuss on this subject, actually. The real question is, if we, nowadays, avoid exposing these racial experiences and how, not only towards black people but every POC, have they struggled every single day, would there be any other way to show future generations how hard life was for them? Would they even, unconsciously, repeat those mistakes?

Quentin Tarantino made a bold move making this film, and critics have interpreted his vision thinking it came from a racist belief, but that type of brutality needs to be shown for us to remember how we, as a community, had fought, how we had resisted, how much strength was needed only to survive. It is, moreover, another path to create history, in the same way Frederick Douglass' work is still taught, for example.

If it could be considered politically incorrect, it would be regarding Tarantino's ethnicity. Unfortunately, I do not think *Django Unchained* (2012) would have made it that far, had it been made by any African-American.

- **Between 2013-2018, three films that dealt with the racial conflict won the Oscar for Best Picture: *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Moonlight* (2016) and *Green Book* (2018). Taking into account the rest of the nominees, do you think that any of them actually won the award because of what they represented, or do you think that all of them deserved the award?**

I think they all deserved recognition, yes, but I daresay the organization has something to do with it as well.

In 2015, having revealed the list of nominees from that year, the Academy received a big backlash regarding the lack of representation when it came to non-white and women directed movies. The media quickly built up a campaign against it and the “#OscarsSoWhite” hashtag gained popularity, creating such bad press on the Oscars that, in 2016, the structure on the research of new nominees quickly changed only to be conscious on the incorporation of wider breadth and more diverse list of filmmakers, actors and actresses. I doubt they would have tilt in favour of such an abrupt diversity on other circumstances, however.

Moreover, there was a big misinterpretation when Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016) received their award, as Damien Chazelle’s *La La Land* (2016) was thought to have won it, an all-white cast accepting happily their deserved prize; but it was Jenkins’ opportunity that night, I must say. Personally, the commotion it created was also to incentive the press to create a bigger fuss, as the Black Lives Matter movement had its peak at the time.

Nevertheless, as I recall on previous questions, I cannot find any issue on taking advantage of the movement as the Oscars have tried, as it has given the black conflict a closer step into power at the end of the day.

- **Films like *Green Book* (2018), *Loving* (2016), *Hidden Figures* (2016) or *Detroit* (2017) deal with the racial conflict but are directed by white people. What do you think?**

I tried to introduce an answer a few questions back, but remained quiet until now.

As a black woman myself, I encourage wholeheartedly sharing and appreciating black material when it comes to art, as it has been boldly pushed to the shadow. We have not had any voice or representation until a few decades ago, and one can challenge themselves into counting how many black directors have made it to the top: Spike Lee, Barry Jenkins, Jordan Peele, or Ava DuVernay, for instance. Not many more.

On the other hand, though, there is a wider range when it comes to white directors. I can easily have a conversation about Christopher Nolan’s with anyone (and, I reaffirm, it would be easy to list four or five movies from him), or create a poll on people’s favourite directors: only a few would dare and resort to people of colour’s works. Even though we had fought for a change, there has always been a hierarchy on how much of an impact a film director can

achieve, and I do not believe the black community has the same voice as others yet. Moreover, if these questions had been made on a feminist research a few decades back, I would have offered a similar answer: women have started gaining power quite recently, as well.

However, society will acclaim most of the films made from directors they're already familiarized with, who happen to be white and have built a larger fanbase before. Even if it was not on their place to deal with struggles they have not experienced, the power placed on their names is enough to spread awareness and reach a common goal: clearing the path for black directors in the future and, certainly, sharing our story in a way that will resonate on the audience. That is enough help.