

## **“Human Tongue Cannot Tell”: Dialect, Lyricism, and Anti-Slavery Arguments in William Wells Browns' The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom (1858)**

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### **Abstract**

Examining the dialogue of the 1858 drama reveals a great deal about the characterizations within the play and of the society in which the playwright lived. The various characters utilize language that often indicates or challenges both their placement within society and the hierarchy of color within the play. Textual analysis reveals that the house slave Cato, a character easily recognized for his sense of self-importance, is consistent in his use of malapropisms, which contrast starkly with the delusions of grandeur Cato possesses. In contrast, the dialogue of protagonists Glen and Melinda reads poetically. They use dialogue that seems lyrical, reminiscent of Shakespeare. Conversely, the slave owners speak in colloquial and unsophisticated terms, thus placing them lower on the spectrum than their slaves. This reading can be applied to each of the characters in the drama, effectively placing them on a social spectrum within the work, which does not mirror that of society at the time. Instead, the sympathetic protagonists appear morally and intellectually superior to their antagonists – the supporters of slave society – indicating that Brown uses the changes in vocabulary as a vehicle to indicate not only the character's social standing, but also their position on slavery.

**Keywords:** Dialect, Abolition, Slavery

### **1. Body of Paper**

William Wells Brown's 1858 play, The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom, tells the story of slaves in a plantation home run by a southern Doctor and his wife. The slaves the reader becomes familiar with over the course of the work are all attempting to find their way to freedom for various reasons. The most intriguing aspect of this work, however, is how the characters express themselves. The reader will be struck by the variations in the diction of characters in ways in which can lead the mind to wonder: why does the change in typical vocabulary matter? Based upon the evidence found in the drama, I assert that Brown uses the changes in vocabulary as a vehicle to indicate not only a character's social standing, but also their position on slavery.

Some of the characters are a great surprise when their dialogue is introduced, while others are surprising in different ways. One such character, residing at the bottom of the hierarchy, is Cato: a house slave to Dr. Gaines. As a house slave, Cato would be traditionally considered a higher ranked member of most households – slaves assigned to the house generally were – but the way he speaks and acts casts him in a much more negative light. In the play, Cato functions as the minstrel character: inserted into the plot for humor. He bumbles, misunderstands, and depicts a character reminiscent of the Black-faced humor that was a common aspect of the vaudeville shows of the time. In this play, however, the minstrel character serves a dual purpose: Cato's obedience and apparent devotion to his masters illustrates that even the most docile and seemingly content slaves desire freedom.

Cato also provides the reader with a look at a character who suffers from delusions of grandeur; in his conviction that he was made to be a doctor, the sense of superiority he feels above other slaves, and his way of speaking; which prohibits his character from ever reaching what he considers his full potential – though this is aided by his general ineptitude. Though he boasts of innate abilities, when left to care for a patient, Cato ends up providing more harm than healing when he pulls the wrong tooth, leading to an extremely disgruntled Bill starting a fight with Cato. Even his successes during his brief tenure as the slave doctor betrays his ineptitude as he provides two different patients with different symptoms identical treatments: check their temperature, look at their tongue, bleed them, give them pills which they are to take twice a day and double the dosage if there is no improvement<sup>1</sup>. When the commotion of the fight over the unjustly pulled tooth calls Dr. Gaines back to the office, Cato preforms better under his master's supervision that he did on his own. Cato makes it clear that he is absolutely convinced the identity of “doctor” comes from appearance, and he seizes the opportunity to wear the coat as soon as Dr. Gaines exits, leaving Cato in charge. During the skirmish with Bill, his coat is torn, and he weeps, believing that his identity as a doctor has been damaged. In regards to speech patterns, Cato is consistent in his use of malapropisms (words used incorrectly, typically confused with a similar sounding word for comedic effect), evident in the scene in which Cato is left to tend to Dr. Gaines' office: “I allers knowed I was a doctor, an' now de ole boss has put me at it, I must change my coat. Ef any niggers comes in, I want to look suspectable”.<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines suspectable as “that

which may or should be suspected, open to suspicion”, which is an accurate of description of Cato's masquerade as a doctor.<sup>3</sup> These malapropisms contrast starkly with the delusion of grandeur Cato possesses.

One key element of the language differentiation used in the play is the notable sophistication of Glen and Melinda's dialogue. They speak with a Shakespearean quality to their language, which – according to Kieth Botelho, author of “‘Look on this picture, and on this’: Framing Shakespeare in William Wells Brown's *The Escape*” – may be exactly the case. During his time in Europe, Brown spent a great deal of time attending Shakespeare productions, so he was undoubtedly familiar with the material. The original publication of the drama even included an epigraph from *Hamlet*: “Look on this picture, and on this”.<sup>4</sup> The epigraph comes from act III, scene IV, when Hamlet is in his mother's chambers and forces her to compare his uncle to his deceased father through their portraits in an attempt to sway her to his side to see that Claudius killed the King. Beyond the poetic quality of the language used by these two characters, there are other places in which Botelho claims Shakespeare's influence can be seen. The attraction of Dr. Gaines (a white man) to Melinda (a mulatto woman) echoes a conflict from *Othello*, and Melinda makes a direct reference to *Hamlet* when she threatens to drown herself in the river, just as Ophelia died: “Command me to bury myself in yonder stream, and I will obey you”.<sup>5</sup> When Mrs. Gaines confronts Melinda, she attempts to convince her to commit suicide by drinking poison, as Juliet does in *Romeo and Juliet* – though Melinda refuses and escapes Mrs. Gaines, resulting in a much happier ending for the female protagonist.<sup>6</sup> William Edward Farrison points out in his biography of Brown that he seems to have modeled Glen's soliloquizing after Hamlet's first two soliloquies as well.

When Glen and Melinda speak to each other, or in a soliloquy about the other, their language is reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet's speeches to one and other. At the beginning of act III, scene IV, Glen speaks about how much he cares for Melinda and how he is willing to do anything necessary to join with her as the married couple they are:

Oh, how I want to see Melinda! My heart pants and my soul is moved whenever I hear her voice. Human tongue cannot tell how my heart yearns towards her. Oh, God! thou who gavest me life, and implanted in the bosom the love of liberty, and gave me a heart to love...<sup>7</sup>

This passage indicates that the language used by Glen is powerful and formal, and that while his main goal is to be reunited with Melinda, he is also on the lookout for freedom. Words are not enough to express his love, and he links the desire for freedom to the heart given to him by God, identifying the desire for freedom that thousands of others have already realized which Glen, as a slave, could only yearn for. By the end of this selection, Glen is equating his love for Melinda to the innate love of freedom possessed by all humans. In his article, Botelho theorizes that by drawing from Shakespeare's works for the speech of the two “star-crossed lovers” he “placed Shakespeare at the forefront of African-American drama ... as a way to catch the conscience of his white audience”.<sup>8</sup> The epigraph, which is not included in the Norton Anthology's version of the play, also contributed to this goal. A sample of Melinda's speech shows similar elements to Glen's:

It is often said that the darkest hour of the night precedes the dawn. It is ever thus with the vicissitudes of human suffering. After the soul has reached the lowest depths of despair, and can no deeper plunge amid its rolling, fetid shades, then the reactionary forces of man's nature begin to operate, resolution takes the place of despondency, energy succeeds instead of apathy, and an upward tendency is felt and exhibited.<sup>9</sup>

Melinda's soliloquy reads poetically, but also contains a fair amount of philosophy, adding to the notion that Melinda is a more educated and well-spoken character. There is also an echo of Glen's direct anti-slavery rhetoric as Melinda speaks of resolution taking the place of despondency and energy surpassing in apathy in terms of the mankind's propensity for revolution and opposition, especially in the case of human suffering. While Glen's speech reminds the audience that the human desire for freedom and autonomy is universal, Melinda reminds them that mankind has a history of fighting against suffering and that, often, it is when people hit their lowest points that they will rise with the most tenacity. These two passages plainly illustrate the contrast between the dialogue of Glen and Melinda to that of Cato and the Gaines in both content and form. The only other characters who speak with such finesse in the drama are the members of the Quaker family that assists Glen and Melinda in their escape. While the Quakers do not speak with the same poetry of Glen and Melinda, their use of archaic pronouns separates them from the other characters' colloquial speech.

When the audience first encounters the Neal family – the household of Quakers who take in Glen and Melinda as refugees – the first line of the scene is spoken by Mrs. Neal, who tells her daughter Charlotte that “thee may put the tea to draw...thy father will be in soon”.<sup>10</sup> It immediately becomes apparent that the Neals are educated people, who are honest and welcome refugee slaves into their home. Such evidence places them on the top of the spectrum as the figures to admire and emulate. While the Quakers in reality would have likely reacted as thus due to their beliefs, it is highly probable that they were given such sympathetic roles in the drama by the personal choice of the playwright. When Brown escaped from slavery on his final, successful attempt, he fell ill while crossing the wilderness and was taken in and nursed back to health by a Quaker family. When the family patriarch asked Brown his name and Brown informed him that as a slave he only had a first name, his host told him that he should adopt a surname now that he was to be a free man. Out of respect for his host – a Mr. Wells Brown – William decided to adopt his name, becoming William Wells Brown.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is possible that the Quaker characters were given the role they were due to Brown's affection for his former host and namesake, but regardless, it is evident that they are supposed to be the moral north of the play.

When viewing the drama through the lens of language, the reader may logically assume that the plantation owners would speak with the most refined vocabulary, but Brown's rhetoric indicates otherwise. While the speech used by the Gaines and other pro-slavery characters is by no means uneducated, it is less formal than that of Mr. White, the only anti-slavery character beside the slaves themselves and the Quaker family. The Gaines language definitely indicates their position on slavery. Throughout the course of the play, variations of the phrase “I'll whip you well” are uttered several times by either

Dr. or Mrs. Gaines, clearly illustrating their views on slavery and their positions in the hierarchy of color. These also appear two of the most flawed characters in the drama. Mrs. Gaines freely admits that she was “born with a silver spoon in her mouth”<sup>12</sup> while Mr. Gaines attempts to clandestinely carry on an affair with one of his slaves, who Mrs. Gaines later tries to kill.<sup>13</sup>

The practice of differentiating characters by speech becomes even more evident when Mr. White is at the tavern speaking, with the barkeeper and other customers. His language is different enough that his fellow customers deduce that he is from out of town very quickly. Though Mr. White speaks against slavery, John Ernest notes in his article, “The Reconstruction of Whiteness: William Wells Brown’s *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom*”, that the apparent devotion to the cause is more active in sentiment than it ever is in action. For the majority of his time on stage, White does nothing but speak about being an abolitionist. He is a profound Northerner who is convinced that slavery is wrong and anyone else who believes otherwise is barbaric. Yet when the reader first meets him, Mr. White is in a tavern surrounded by Southern slave holders with a manhunt for an escaped slave going on, and all he accomplishes is convincing an angry mob that he is their next target. Throughout the course of the play, his rhetoric is strong, but there is no action to support it. The only action – beyond his attempts to sketch the Falls while waiting for the ferry in Buffalo – the audience sees from Mr. White occurs at the very end of the play as he witnesses the battle about to commence between the officers and the fugitive slaves. Even then, there is only a single stage direction indicating that Mr. White has entered the fray. Thus, I assert that the only purpose for Mr. White’s character is to act as a vehicle for abolitionist arguments, as illustrated by his monologue in the first scene of act 5.

Upon the play’s publication, it was not intended as a performance piece. Brown read it himself around the abolitionary circuit, providing his own voice to lend life to each of his characters. This fact suggests a possible secondary, more practical motive, for the differentiation in dialects and rhetoric; changing the way in which the characters spoke made it easier for the audience to tell which character is speaking at the time. More than just identifying the characters during the reading, their differing speech patterns help to place them on a spectrum of society: from pro-slavery to abolitionists, or in a position in the hierarchy of color. The positions of characters become evident through comparison with other characters: the Gaines do not speak in an uneducated fashion, but they do not speak as formally as the Neal family. The Gaines are slave owners, while the Neal family harbors fugitive slaves and helps them to freedom. Thus, the two character sets reside on opposite sides of the spectrum. When addressing the hierarchy of color, Brown choose to challenge traditionally held stereotypes by placing household slave Cato below Glen and Melinda, one of whom was a field slave. Again, the ranking becomes evident through comparison. By choosing to assign vocabulary in the way that he did, Brown challenged stereotypes and brought the plight of slavery into new light by appealing to his audience in a different way, illustrating that yes, language does matter.

## 2. Notes

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2. Ibid., 1.2.11-12.
3. “Suspectable.” *Oxford English Dictionary. OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 7 April 2013.
4. Botelho, Keith M. “‘Look on this picture, and on this’: framing Shakespeare in William Wells Brown’s *The Escape*.” *Comparative Drama* 39.2 (2005): 187+. *Academic OneFile*. 188. Web. 9 Apr. 2013.
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8. Botelho, Keith M. “‘Look on this picture, and on this’: framing Shakespeare in William Wells Brown’s *The Escape*.” *Comparative Drama* 39.2 (2005): 187+. *Academic OneFile*. 202. Web. 9 Apr. 2013.
9. Brown, William Wells. *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom*. 119-120. In *The Norton Anthology of Drama, Volume 2*. Gen. ed. Peter Simon. New York: Norton, 2009. 1.3.38-43. Print.
10. Ibid., 5.4.1.
11. Farrison, William Edward. *William Wells Brown: Author & Reformer*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1969. 59. Print.
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13. Ibid., 138.

### 2.1 Additional Works Consulted

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