

Eberhard-Karls Universität Tübingen  
 WS 2014/15  
 HS Teachable Films  
 Prof. Dr. Christoph Reinfandt  
 Ragna Tietjen  
 3739022

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*12 Years a Slave*

Director	Steve McQueen
Producer	Plan B Entertainment
Screenplay	John Ridley
Author	Solomon Northup
Released in	2013
Genre	Historical Period Drama
Length	134 minutes
Summary	<i>12 Years a Slave</i> is an adaption of the slave narrative memoir by Solomon Northup published in 1853 under the same title. It features actor Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup, a freeborn African-American violinist living with his family in Saratoga, New York. In 1841, he is lured to Washington D.C. under false premises, where his travelling companions kidnap him to sell him into slavery. Northup is transported to Louisiana, where the slave trader Freeman gives him the new identity of Platt, a slave from Georgia, and sells him to the plantation owner William Ford. Due to quarrels with the overseer Tibeats, Ford sells Northup to Edwin Epps, another plantation owner, who treats his slaves with violence and cruelty. Northup works on several different plantations and repeatedly, although unsuccessfully, tries to explain his situation to save his life and his dignity. Eventually, he meets the Canadian laborer Samuel Bass. Bass, an abolitionist, risks his life to send a letter to Northup's family in the North. During the 12 <sup>th</sup> year of his odyssey, Northup is finally rescued and brought back to his family.
Structure	McQueen uses a non-linear narrative structure, as there are frequent flashbacks and time jumps at the beginning, which emphasize the different situations Northup is exposed to. Through the course of the film the structure become more linear and follows a chronological order. The narration is subjective and from the point of view of the main protagonist.

<p>Characters</p>	<p>The diagram shows the following relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>William Ford</b> (Slave owner; kind) is <i>Kind to</i> <b>Solomon Northup</b>.</li> <li><b>John M. Tibeats</b> (Carpenter/slave owner; cruel) is <i>Cruel to</i> <b>Solomon Northup</b>.</li> <li><b>James H. Burch</b> (Slave trader; cruel) <i>Sold Solomon to</i> <b>William Ford</b>.</li> <li><b>James H. Burch</b> <i>Kidnapped by</i> <b>Solomon Northup</b>.</li> <li><b>Edwin Epps</b> (Slave owner; abusive) is <i>Cruel to</i> <b>Solomon Northup</b>.</li> <li><b>Edwin Epps</b> is <i>Married to</i> <b>Mistress Epps</b> (Wife of Edwin Epps).</li> <li><b>Edwin Epps</b> is <i>Abusive to</i> <b>Mistress Epps</b>.</li> <li><b>Edwin Epps</b> is <i>Abusive to</i> <b>Patsey</b> (Slave).</li> <li><b>Bass</b> (White carpenter; abolitionist) <i>Helps</i> <b>Solomon Northup</b>.</li> <li><b>Solomon Northup</b> is <i>Friends with</i> <b>Patsey</b>.</li> <li><b>Patsey</b> is <i>Abusive to</i> <b>Mistress Epps</b>.</li> </ul>
<p>Topics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slavery and Slave trading in the American South and worldwide</li> <li>• Human Rights, (In-) Humanity</li> <li>• American Civil War / Abolitionist Movement</li> <li>• Discrimination of race and gender</li> <li>• Tolerance, Respect</li> </ul>
<p>Helpful Secondary Literature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McGlinn, Jeanne and McGlinn, James, <i>A Teacher's Guide to Twelve Years A Slave by Solomon Northup</i>. New York: Penguin Group, 2014.</li> <li>• Ryan, Michael and Lenos, Melissa, <i>An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film</i>. New York/London: Continuum, 2012.</li> <li>• Thaler, Engelbert. <i>Teaching English with Films</i>. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014.</li> </ul>
<p>Language</p>	<p>The dialect of the US South may at times be hard to understand and the language is sometimes a little bit harsh, though with some preparation and subtitles it should not be problematic.</p>
<p>Suitable Age</p>	<p>Grades 10-12 (Pupils older than 15)</p>
<p>Activities</p>	<p>Literary aspects of the film</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plot, Characters, Motifs</li> <li>• Dramatic structure of the film</li> </ul> <p>Film Analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of technical terms (camera adjustments, editing, stylistic devices, ...)</li> <li>• Analysis of key scenes</li> </ul> <p>Beyond the film</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussing the topics tolerance and respect for other</li> </ul>

	people/cultures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problems and consequences of inequality</li> </ul>	
Teachability	Pros	Cons
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Exceptional and unsettling insights into slavery in the US (which is part of the curriculum)</li> <li>+ Compelling and emotional story -&gt; emphasizes the social and historical relevance of the topic</li> <li>+ Gives the opportunity to discuss connected areas such as tolerance, respect, equality, discrimination of any kind, etc.</li> <li>+ Possibility to read the book</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Length of the film makes it difficult to watch in school</li> <li>- Several scenes contain very graphic demonstrations of violence and can be upsetting and uncomfortable for the pupils</li> </ul>
Overall Evaluation	<p>The film <i>12 Years a Slave</i> is very suitable for the classroom, as it realistically depicts the historical and social circumstances of slavery in the United States of America. It is a compelling and unsettling story that inspires to discuss relevant topics such as discrimination, inequality, violence, but also tolerance, respect, friendship and human rights. It furthermore offers a wide range of camera work, narrative and stylistic devices, which can be discussed and analyzed in order to foster pupil's understanding of film literacy. The fact that the film is based on an autobiographical narration increases the variety of teaching materials and approaches to choose from.</p>	