

William Wells Brown and the Jefferson and Hemings Scandal

Kristin Hrabak
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Revision

William Wells Brown wrote Clotel or The President's Daughter, a (fiction) novel based on the rumors surrounding Thomas Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemings, his slave. Brown learned of the scandal while working in several antislavery activities following his escape from slavery in 1834. Brown wanted not only to improve the social status of blacks and to support abolition through his writing, but also to encourage his readers to "develop a skeptical relationship to glorified stories of the national past" (Levine 15). He chose to write a novel that not only questioned slavery, but also questioned the validity of the principles that this nation was founded on.

Rumors about the affair between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings were circulating on a small scale after Hemings gave birth to several children who were noticeably light-skinned. Visitors as early as 1796 to Monticello, Jefferson's home in Virginia, often noted, "Mr. Jefferson's [slaves] had neither in their color nor features a single trace of their origin" (Rothman 87). It was clear to many that the slave children at Monticello were the result of interracial sexual relationships. Not until James Callender made a public accusation in 1802, however, did the scandal make its way into the press.

James Callender was a supporter of Jeffersonian Republican politics, and he began writing political columns for the *Philadelphia Gazette* in the 1790s. His views were more extreme than those of the political party that he supported, however, and his writing was untactful. He attacked politicians who belonged to other parties, and exposed scandals where scandals could be found (or created?). He was eventually fired from the *Gazette*, but only after making a name for himself among the Jeffersonian Republican party. The party was struggling at the time and appreciated Callender's efforts to "diminish the public stature" (Rothman 90) of their opponents. Jefferson paid

Callender to continue writing political pamphlets to help the party. But eventually Callender became irritated with the Republicans, feeling that they used him just to suit their purposes.

When Jefferson won the election of 1800, Callender felt he had played an important role in getting Jefferson elected. He wanted to be compensated with some much needed money and a job. When he didn't hear from Jefferson quickly enough, however, he became impatient and made threats to reveal some of Jefferson's secrets. In September of 1802 Callender fulfilled his threats by outing President Jefferson and his mistress in an article printed in the *Richmond Recorder*. This was the first article in the press to discuss the scandal, and it primed the way for many other articles, verses, and eventually the novel, Clotel.

It's clear from his writings that Callender hated African Americans and found the notion of interracial sex to be both disturbing and disgusting. He accused Sally of being a slut who had at least "fifteen or thirty [different lovers] of all colours" (Rothman 95). He was hoping that exposing Jefferson's affair with Ms. Hemings would ruin the President's reputation by causing the same disgust in his political supporters. Callender clearly had no idea that Jefferson's supporters would be so accepting of his interracial affair. Virginians of the time had assumed a "don't ask, don't tell" policy in which interracial affairs were simply overlooked or ignored (Rothman 96). As a result, there was no shock or disgust at the unveiling of the scandal. In fact, most people had already heard rumors about it, and one man's accusations in a political journal did not change their knowledge about the subject. Furthermore, the accusations that Callender made against Jefferson weren't taken seriously because Callender wasn't a well-respected man.

Many had the opinion that a “bad man” could only create a “bad story” (Gordon-Reed 75). Also, Callender’s lack of substantial evidence caused many to disbelieve his theory as the opinion of a vengeful extremist.

Nevertheless, what Callender did accomplish was to start a torrent of verses, articles, and caricatures on the topic throughout the 19th century. The picture shown in the Appendix is a caricature of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings drawn in 1802. It is just one of many such political cartoons to appear in journals during the time period.

Verses that began emerging in the press included both, in the *Philadelphia Port Folio*,

Den Quashee [a Negro] de white wife will hab
And Massa *Jefferson* will hab de black. (Dabney 12),

and

Go, wretch, resign the presidential chair,
Disclose thy secret features foul or fair...
Go scan, Philosophist, thy ***** charms,
And sink supinely in her sable arms;
But quit to abler hands the helm of state,
Nor image ruin on thy country’s fate! (Dabney 13).

Although several such verses appeared throughout Jefferson’s first term in office, they could not generate enough support to oust Jefferson from the White House. He was reelected in 1804, and the rumors died down for about 25 years.

In the 1830s the subject was revived in the political arena to support the abolitionist movement as well as to ruin the credibility of the Republican Party. In 1838 Dr. Gaylord of Sodus, New York, wrote that an Otis Reynolds of St. Louis, MO, had witnessed the sale of Jefferson’s daughter in New Orleans for \$1,000 (Dabney 15-16). This letter was published in William Goodell’s Weekly and then republished in William

Lloyd Garrison's famous Boston abolitionist journal, *The Liberator*, where it was probably read by William Wells Brown.

In 1834 William Wells Brown escaped from slavery, and by 1836 he had set up residence in Buffalo, New York. While in Buffalo, he became heavily involved in antislavery activities. Although there is no evidence to confirm that Brown was reading *The Liberator* at the time that these verses were published, it is likely that he was. For instance, 10 years after Dr. Gaylord's letter was published in *The Liberator*, Brown published "Jefferson's Daughter" in the same abolitionist paper:

Can the blood that at Lexington poured o'er the plain,
When the sons warred with tyrants their rights to uphold,
Can the tide of Niagara wipe out the stain?
No! Jefferson's child has been bartered for gold!

The daughter of Jefferson sold for a slave!
The child of a freeman for dollars and francs!
The roar of applause, when your orators rave,
Is lost in the sound of her chain, as it clanks...

When the incense that glows before Liberty's shrine,
Is unmixed with the blood of the galled and oppressed,-
O, then, and then only, the boast may be thine,
That the stripes and stars wave o'er the land of the blest.
(Dabney 16)

This verse appeared in *The Liberator* just after Brown moved to Boston and began lecturing for William Lloyd Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Stanzas were eventually added to the verse, and pieces were included in Clotel.

Brown saw his writing as a way to forward the cause of the abolitionist movement. The Jefferson and Hemings scandal, being a popular topic among abolitionists, gave Brown an opportunity to offer a fictionalized version of history that would cause people to question the values of "the father of American freedom" and

thereby question the values of our country. Jefferson's views about slavery and racism seemed very contradictory. Jefferson "expressed an overall abhorrence of the institution, focusing in particular on how slavery corrupts the masters" (Levine 11). However, he owned slaves all his life, and even though he did free several slaves at the time of his death, even more were sold back into slavery. Jefferson also wrote that blacks were as "incapable as children of taking care of themselves" (Levine 12). He was a strong supporter of colonization, feeling that free blacks were inferior and would be a drain on the American society. When reading the above statements and others from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), one can find many contradictory thoughts. It is hard to determine which statements are true and which are not as true. Clearly, though, Brown saw the hypocrisy in the Jefferson's opinions. Even though Jefferson wanted freedom for all men, he did not believe the black population in America should share in that freedom.

Brown wrote a fictionalized story that was based on true events to make his audiences wonder which facts and ideas were true and which were created. In Clotel, Brown writes,

Thus closed a negro sale, at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder!
(Brown 88)

Even though Clotel is a fictionalized story, Brown writes as if he is rewriting history, as if he is exposing an alternate truth. With so much of his novel being pieced together like a patchwork quilt from poems, songs, and stories both true and created, Brown creates a literary environment where anything and everything could be true, and even the

foundations of our nation, which seem to be so strong, could be weakened by the threat of corruption.

Brown “encourages readers to develop a skeptical relationship to glorified stories of the national past” (Levine 15). Rather than writing a nonfiction narrative in which all of the stories are true, he asserts that you can’t believe everything you read. Although some authors such as Frederick Douglass, who wrote Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, might think that is no way to persuade an audience, Brown tries to detract critics from his own text and direct them to the history books that so fondly portray our nation’s fathers. Clotel is unique in that it serves not only to create support for the abolitionist movement, but also to negate the value of the “heroic founding narrative that has Jefferson at its untroubled center” (Levine 14).

Works Cited

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Appendix



"A Philosphic Cock," a caricature of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, 1802 (Milgram 1).

