

## African American Literature

The first black people who came to America were not slaves, but explorers (blacks sailed with Christopher Columbus, accompanied Spanish and Portuguese explorers). Later the Africans were brought to America to work as labourers. They were classed as servants who would become free if they worked for their masters for a certain number of years. But by 1700, with the growing plantations, there was a great demand for a cheap work force and the institution of so called „chattel slavery“ was established. Blacks became not just temporary servants but the lifetime property of their masters.

White slaveholders attempted to suppress African culture. In South Caroline, for example, the literacy and drum playing of the blacks were punishable by law. But despite various restrictions, literacy and Christianity often became vehicles for slaves' resistance.

### ORAL TRADITION

The most accessible literature for blacks existed in oral tradition, and the most widespread genres during the era of slavery were spirituals, work songs and folktales.

**Spirituals** are the religious songs, showing significant melodic and rhythmic relationshipss with West African songs (call/response patterns). Spirituals often contained coded information as a form of secret communication. Most of the spirituals were about Old Testament heroes and prophets: Moses, Job, Daniel, Samson. In spirituals blacks identified Egyptland with the South, Pharaoh with the white master, the Israelites with themselves and Moses with their leader who would lead them to their „promised land“ – in their case either to non-slave-holding states or Canada.

**Folk tales:** The blacks took hold of American Indian and Euro-American tales and changed them into unmistakably black American shapes and themes. There are several types of these tales: trickster tales, tales explaining how things came to be as they are, tales with lessons about difficult life in the South of the USA.

Slavery was closely connected to racism. People assumed that differences in external appearance signified differences in the inherent character – intelligence, morality, spirituality. Since the end of the 17th century white Americans wondered whether or not the blacks could create formal literature, and could ever master the arts and sciences. If they could, this would mean that their humanity is closely related to European humanity. If not, this would mean that they were destined by nature to be slaves. So writing for the slaves was not only an activity of the mind, it was also a commodity that gave them access to their full humanity.

**Phillis Wheatley** (1753?-1784) was the first black person to publish a book of poetry in English. She was born in West Africa, at the age of 7 enslaved, John Wheatley bought her for his wife to serve as a personal maid. The Wheatley family encouraged Phillis to study the Bible, and to read English and Latin literature, history and geography. When she was 11, she started to write poetry.

White Americans did not believe that the verses were composed by an African-American, thus Phillis had to undergo an oral examination in the courthouse in Boston. 18 notable citizens (including the governor of the colony) asked many questions, were satisfied with Phillis's answers, and wrote a document confirming that she was really the author of the poems. This document was then published as the preface to her volume of poetry:

*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatly, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England*

**SLAVE NARRATIVES:** that genre dominated literary production of black slaves from 1830 to the end of the slavery era. Slave narratives were written by slaves who managed to escape from the South. They portrayed slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation. The prefaces to those narratives were written by the white abolitionists, who attested to the reliability and good character of the narrator, and commented on the immorality of slavery.

### **Frederick Douglas** (1818-1895)

Son of a slave and an unknown white man. His mother died when he was 7. Before he was old enough to do fieldwork, he worked as a servant and taught himself to read and write. At the age of 16 he had to work as a farm worker, and experienced hard labour, merciless whipping, repeated humiliations. Nevertheless, he managed to escape to New York, where he became very active in the abolitionist movement as a lecturer.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845)

### **Harriet Ann Jacobs** (1813?-1897)

was the first woman to author a slave narrative. She was born a slave, during her teens was subjected to constant sexual harrassment. She decided to pretend she had run away and lived for 7 years in a little space above a storeroom in her grandmother's house. Then she managed to escape to the North where she wrote her autobiography:

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Told by Herself* (1861)