

Chapter 6

Responses to Slavery: Spirituals and Stories

While the masters were doing everything in their power to control slaves, what were the slaves thinking? We have very little direct evidence, but we do have a record of songs and stories the slaves sang and told. They tell us a good deal about how the slaves viewed their condition.

The songs you are about to read (with one exception) are known as 'Negro Spirituals'. They were song by slaves and later written down, and are still song today. Most of them refer to the experience of the Hebrew people in captivity in Egypt and Babylon and were taken from the Old Testament of the Bible. But it is clear to see that the slaves saw a parallel between their situation as slaves and that of the Hebrew people.

We Raise the Wheat (not a spiritual)

We raise the wheat,
We bake the bread,
They give us the corn;
They give us the crust;
We sift the meal,
They give us the skin,
And that's the way
They take us in.

We skim the pot
They give us the liquor,
And say that's good enough for them.

The big bee flies high,
The little bee makes the honey.
The black folks makes the cotton
And the white folks get the money.

Go Down, Moses

(Note: Moses led the Hebrew people out of their captivity in Egypt. The Pharaoh was the King of Egypt)

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

When Israel was in
Egypt land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they
could not stand
Let my people go.

Go down Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
"Let my people go."

"Thus saith the Lord,"
bold Moses said,
"Let my people go;
If not I'll smite your
first-born dead
Let my people go."

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go!"

Swing Low - Sweet Chariot

(Note: the Jordan River was the border of Israel, the home of the Hebrew people)

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming forth to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming forth to carry me home

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Coming forth to carry me home
A band of angels, coming after me
Coming forth to carry me home.

Nobody Knows the_

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Gory, Hallelujah!

Sometimes I'm up,
sometimes I'm down,
Oh, yes, Lord!
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,
Oh, Yes, Lord!
Although you see me
going along, so.
Oh, yes, Lord!
I have my troubles here below,

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel

(note: Daniel was thrown into a den with a lion who did not eat him because Daniel had helped the lion)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Then why not every man?

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale
The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
Then why not every man?

Trouble I've Seen

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!

One day when I was walking along,
Oh, yes, Lord!
The elements opened and His love came
down,
Oh, yes, Lord!

I never shall forget that day,
Oh, yes, Lord!
When Jesus washed my sins away,
Oh, yes, Lord!

Oh, yes, Lord!

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!

Stories Told By Slaves

'High John de Conquer' was a slave who always seemed to get the best of his master. There were hundreds of High John stories. One is told here. What does the story tell about the slaves who tell it.

Possum

Old Massa loved roasted young pigs, and had them often for dinner. Old John loved them too, but Massa never allowed the slaves to eat any at all. John got tired of that. He took to stopping by the pigpen when he had a strong taste for pigmeat, and getting himself one, and taking it on down to his cabin and cooking it.

Massa began to miss his pigs, and made up his mind to see who was taking them. John keeps taking pigs, and one night Massa walked him down, and saw John kill the pig. Massa went back to the big house and waited till he figured John had it dressed and cooking. Then he went on down to the quarters and knocked on John's door.

"Who's dat?" John called out big and bold.

"It's me, John," Massa told him. "I want to come in."

"Naw, naw, Massa. You don't want to come into no old slave cabin. Youse too fine a man for that.

"I tell you, I want to come in, John!"

So John had to open the door and let Massa in. John had seasoned that pig down, and it was stinking pretty! John knowed old Massa couldn't help but smell it. Massa talked on about crops and hound dogs and one thing and another, and the pot with the pig in it was hanging over the fire in the chimney and kicking up. The smell got better and better.

Way after while, Massa said, "John, whats cooking in dat pot?"

Nothing but a little old weasly possum, Massa."

Get a plate and give me some of it, John. I am hungry."

"Aw, naw, Massa, you ain't hungry."

"Now, John, I don't mean to argue with you another minute. You give me some of that in the pot, or I mean to have the hide of o your back tomorrow morning. Give it to me."

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

So John got up and went and went to the pot. He lifted the lid and looked at Massa and told him, "Well Massa, I put this thing ain't here a possum, but it come out a pig, it ain't no fault of mine."

Old Massa didn't want to laugh, but he did before he caught himself. He took the plate of browned down pig and ate it up. He never said nothing, but he gave John and all the other house servants roast pig at the big house after that.²⁴

Malitis

The following story is based on one of the recordings of former slaves made during the 1930's. Like the High John story, it is about how the slaves tricked the master to get pig meat.

Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a drying in the hot winds. But they get even one hog killing time, and it was funny, too.

There was seven hogs, fat and ready to fall hog killing time. Just the day before Old Master told off they was to be killed, somethin happen to all them porkers. One of the filed boys found them and come a telling the master; The hogs all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter.

When the master gets to where the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing around sorrow eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: "Whats the illness with them?"

"Malitis," they tells him and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't any more meat on the place.

He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but thats because he is afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs got militis.

Now the master never knew that long before the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins one of the strongest Negroes got up. He skitted down to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog tween the eyes with the mallet, malitis set in pretty quick. But it was an uncommon disease, even with hungry Negroes around all the time.²⁵

Suggested Student Exercises

1. Explain what the slaves were saying about their own lives by:
 - a. Taking each song separately, and state what is meant by each important phrase.
 - b. Summarizing the stories and telling the real moral of each.

²⁴ Quoted in, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, ed., *The Book of Black Folklore*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965),

²⁵ B.A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1945, pp. 4-5.