



# SO YOU WANT TO WRITE A SLAVE NARRATIVE...

## Advice to Northern Women from the Desk of Harriet Beecher Stowe

**E**ver since I became famous as “The Little Lady who made this Big War,” in the Words of our great President Abraham Lincoln (who, in Truth, was not smiling especially broadly when he called me that),

other Northern Women have been asking for Advice. “Harriet, I would love to have a hobby like yours,” they tell me, “one that allows me to contribute more to the War Effort than just knitting socks or pounding hardtack. But I have no experience with Slavery. I have never even seen a Negro, except once in a traveling minstrel show (and I suspect he may have been a painted Irishman).”

My Sisters, do not let Ignorance stand in your way! One does not need to witness Slavery firsthand to describe it with moving Near-Accuracy. (In any case, the Southern Women who could speak with greater Authority on the subject are too busy scribbling Gossip in their endless Diaries, unlikely to be published until long after their Deaths.) You need only remember these simple Guidelines when writing about “Life among the Lowly”:

- p Negroes have “woolly” heads. One can never overuse such a vivid adjective.
- p They pronounce words comically. A heavy sprinkling of apostrophes will indicate this.
- p They frequently sing Hymns in deep, booming voices. A few verses of “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel” per chapter can really flesh out your Manuscript!
- p White Men, good or bad, are always tall. White Women (who are never bad, though usually indifferent) are always “angelic.”
- p The Christian Allegory in your Narrative should be fairly obvious—for instance, you must consistently label your unredeemed Negro “goblin-like” or “wicked.”
- p You will find it difficult to avoid long, boring passages of Dialogue if you wish to make a point about the Evil of Slavery. Be sure to add Excitement to these pages with dramatic, unmotivated gestures and passionate interjections (I favor the versatile “O!”). Such Conversations should always take place just before a meal, so that they can be interrupted by a well-placed dinner bell if they become too controversial.
- p Finally, remember not to overuse the term “Slavery,” as it tends to make Readers uncomfortable. When possible, replace it with a tasteful Euphemism, such as “The Peculiar Institution,” “The Shame of the South,” or “The Inexhaustible Metaphor.”

For an example of these simple principles at work, study the following passage from *The Cabin Done Gone*, my upcoming Sequel to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

Sipsy and Big Mama sat on the verandah of the Tall Oaks Plantation House in L\_\_\_\_\_, Kentucky, scratching their woolly heads. “O! Sipsy!” exclaimed Big Mama. “I’se of a mind to sing me a pow’fl spir’chl song.” She raised her hands to Heaven and bellowed,

Oh! how ah wish my Jesus'd come  
And make the Southlan' lose this War  
So that we all don' hafta be slaves  
No more, no more, no more...

"Quit that ter'ble howlin'!" exclaimed wicked Sipsy, making a face like a Goblin and pulling on her woolly hair.

"O! Sipsy, but you must believe in Jesus!" exclaimed Little Angelica, who had come up behind them quietly, like an Angel. "He will save you from your Sins. Oh, how I long to go to Him." She sighed, casting her eyes toward Heaven and laying her angelic hand across her breast.

"I declare, Miss Angelica, you is, O! de mos' perfect critter I ever did see," Big Mama exclaimed, laying her big dark hand on Little Angelica's white forehead. "Not like our Sipsy, who is such a wicked lil' Goblin!"

In the big parlor, Joseph St. John, the tall owner of the Plantation, was involved in a heated conversation with his sister Minerva. "I am more convinced each day that this Peculiar Institution is going to bring me to my Ruin," he declared, sighing.

"O, Brother, I do wish you wouldn't worry so much," Minerva sighed, laying her hand on his forehead with a concerned expression.

"But don't you think that forcing the Negroes to work for us without pay is a little Bit un-Christian?" St. John pressed.

Minerva yawned. "I would rather not think about these things." She raised one hand to heaven, listlessly.

"But Sister," St. John exclaimed. "What will happen here in L\_\_\_\_, Kentucky, if we do not triumph? What will happen to Big Mama (who is such a good Christian) if we lose this War?"

Before Minerva could answer, the breakfast bell rang. As they entered the Dining Room they could hear Big Mama's deep, powerful voice coming through the window, singing as she worked,

How I hope that nuthin' happens  
To sep'rate me 'n' my kin,  
'Cos O! That'd be the worstest,  
Mos' awful kind o' Sin...

As you can see, after only a few paragraphs, the scene is already set for didactic Melodrama on a Biblical Scale. Aspiring Authoresses, take heed, and you will be turning out 600-page Tomes of Righteousness in no time!

— WILSON/  
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