

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797)

*Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (A, 1340-1349)*

Olaudah Equiano was an Ibo villager who was trapped by the slave trade, who was forced to suffer the horrors of the Middle Passage, which he describes in appalling detail, and who eventually was enabled to purchase his freedom in London—after years of enduring one slave role after another in the Caribbean and Britain. To have gone through this much, and to have written about it in a whistle clean narrative, is already a lot; but for Equiano there was much more to come; effective testimony and participation in the Abolitionist Movement, as well as life as a sailor, which included a voyage to find a passage to India by way of the North Pole. What a life!

*Question: What is the canon of a literature?*

When a national literature is anthologized, as in the *Norton Anthology* we are reading from, choices are made about what texts to choose. If you were to peruse a collection of anthologies created in the last hundred years, you would be surprised to see how different the texts chosen are; and you would probably start to ask yourself whether there are some texts that absolutely should belong in any collection at all, texts which have so much 'intrinsic value,' that they require inclusion. In thinking through that question you would be on a threshold of the disputatious literary canon issue, which has sparked many cultural battles in our own times. You would be asking yourself what the canon of British literature is, or whether there is one. What do you think of the inclusion of Equiano in the present anthology? I hope you found the tale telling of Equiano gripping. I hope you are able to distinguish your aesthetic pleasure from your satisfaction in following the course of the author's life. It is hard not to challenge the marmoreal quality of the canon, but equally hard to miss the unappealable greatness of many of the authors we read in this class. *Is there a fixed canon of the best in British literature, or is there simply a list of approved tales maintained by the white male guardians of upper class British society in the last four centuries? Is Equiano a significant, or just a culturally important, writer? Or is there a difference between the two?*

### *Comparative Literature*

1. Several hundred slave narratives were published during the 18th and 19th centuries. Certain of these narratives celebrate the religious inspirations which made slavery endurable, others proclaim the importance of the Abolitionist cause, still others concentrate on the personal joys of freedom. The Federal Works Project Administration, in the 1930's, preserved many oral narratives of then still living former slaves. You would find it informative to look into slave narratives in general, and to see what traits they share with other kinds of literature. (Cf. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 1972-79). You will want to think, as you carry through this research, of the limits of literature; where does "literature" end and "document" begin? Does the "canon" of significant literary texts include "document-like works" or only aesthetic masterpieces?

2. Comparative Literature was in its origins a study of the relations among different national literatures. The operative assumption, in that starting point, was that literatures have national homes. You might want to study the evolution of Comparative Literature as it has worked to incorporate more sophisticated versions of the idea of national literature. A writer like Equiano is a clear challenge to the bond between nationalism and literature. For a view of the early stages of Comparative Literature, cf. Phillip Rhein, *Comparative Literature: The Early Years* (1973). More recent developments, taking account of globalism, and even of "planetarism," have attempted to move the discourse of Comparative Literature far beyond the boundaries initially envisaged by Goethe and other Europeans, who generated the idea of Weltliteratur in the late 18th century.