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The Life and Adventures of Jonathan
Jefferson Whitlaw; or Scenes on the
Mississippi

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The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw; or Scenes on the Mississippi

Domain: Literature. Genre: Novel. Country: England, Britain, Europe.

Frances Trollope (1836)

Article contributed by

[Brenda Ayres, Liberty University](#)

The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw is arguably the most important novel that Frances Trollope wrote, yet it has not been in print since 1857, nor is it available anywhere online. Literary and history enthusiasts alike need to know about this novel and create a market for its reprint.

Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore* is often attributed as the first anti-slavery book to have been written. However, the true tribute should go to Aphra Behn for her *Ooronoko* (1688) in which Behn depicted blacks not only as human beings rather than animals, but as people of dignity, intelligence, and emotions. Notwithstanding the importance of her novel, one had yet to be written that clearly articulated the evils of the slave trade. That was not done until 1836, the year that both Hildreth and Trollope wrote their novels, with Trollope's the first to be published by six months.

Hildreth's novel did not sell well despite going through seven editions between 1836 and 1848. Only after Hildreth expanded the novel and retitled it *White Slave* in 1852 did it become widely read throughout America, Britain, and France. Some scholars, notably Charles Nilon in 1958, have noted the similarities between *The Slave* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, suggesting that the former novel gave Stowe many ideas for her book. However, these scholars, except for Harold Scudder in 1944, have often overlooked *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* which created a sensation when it came out fifteen years earlier than Stowe's novel.

Fanny Trollope had spent two-and-a-half years in America, most of it in Cincinnati, Ohio. She left that city in March, 1830, shortly before the arrival of Harriet Beecher Stowe who moved there in 1832 to join her father. No doubt Stowe heard many stories about the notorious Trollope, who had given an unflattering account of the citizens of Cincinnati in her famous book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. They recalled well "Old Madame Vinegar" who had criticised city for what she perceived as an appalling lack of manners and culture – a glaring deprivation which she had then single-handedly, and with little success, attempted to remedy.

Despite her preoccupations with the slovenly behaviour of its inhabitants, Trollope had been quick to realise that there were worse defects in this brave new world than their inability to use a knife and a fork properly. The desperate escape of slaves crossing the Ohio River from the neighboring slave state of Kentucky into Ohio, which Stowe would also witness firsthand, had also been seen by Trollope during her time in the region, and both writers were powerfully affected by the stories of how brutally mistreated

they had been. Trollope and Stowe became correspondents and friends, and Stowe visited Trollope in Florence in 1860.

Certainly Stowe was a passionate abolitionist and skilled novelist in her own right. Nonetheless, it seems very likely that Trollope's earlier novel had inspired her to produce *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which that Abraham Lincoln later described as the "little book that started this big war." One of Trollope's biographers, Helen Heineman, provides a detailed comparison between the two novels in *Mrs. Trollope: The Triumphant Feminine in the Nineteenth Century* (144-45). To the interest of literary and history scholars alike, then, a strong argument can be made that if Stowe had not read Trollope's *JJW*, it is very likely that Stowe would not have written the novel that she did. *JJW* could also be granted the dubious honor of having ignited the American Civil War.

Susan Kissel, in *Frances Trollope and the Novel of Social Change*, agrees that Trollope paved the way for Stowe's book, as well as influencing several others (including Dickens and Gaskell) to write some of their groundbreaking works of social criticism. Additionally, Trollope's novel offers countless important themes not addressed by either Hildreth or Stowe. Its eponymous character reveals to readers how the system of slavery not only oppresses the slaves that it exploits, but that its cruel machinations can transform all those who benefit from the system – not just the slave owners, whether fiendish or seemingly benevolent – into sadistic, perverse tyrants. It was a warning to all white people as to how evil slavery was – not just to the black people labouring on their plantations, but to those who controlled them as well. The book confronts its readers with the message that nobody is safe from moral contagion as long as slavery is allowed.

The novel begins with the arrival of a family staking a claim in the black delta of the Deep South. Whitlaw is a brutish sort who bullies his cowering wife into working herself to death. Shortly after giving birth to a strapping man-child, the wife, Portia, dutifully dies. Her sister-in-law, Clio, takes over the responsibilities of raising the young Whitlaw and tending to every need and whim of her brother. Jonathan Jefferson grows up to be shrewd, conniving, and sly, driven – as Trollope thought most Americans were – by a compulsion for financial success. He and his father build up a prosperous store, selling to boats coming down the Mississippi. Jonathan meets Colonel Dart on one of his river trips, who decides to mentor him into becoming his personal confidential clerk. Translated, this means that Jonathan will be expected to spy on the slaves to make sure that they are not slacking, stealing, or conspiring to murder the Dart family.

Once the Whitlaws are resituated in an area called Mount Etna, near Natchez, they meet the Steinmark family. These are immigrants from Bavaria who are in Trollope's story as exemplars of farmers who can run a large, successful operation without slaves. The Whitlaws look down on them because according to their code, having slaves is a status symbol. To the Steinmarks, having slaves is an abomination against God, and at risk to their own lives, they give sanctuary to slave refugees.

Jonathan's philosophy is that in America, every man should be free to do whatever he pleases. Accordingly, he is quite the hedonist. Of course, slaves are not considered men, and white women are not considered a part of mankind. He is rather astounded then when Steinmark's only daughter, Lotte, refuses to marry him. Piqued, he intends to take by force Phebe, an attractive, light-skinned, devoutly religious young slave. His efforts are thwarted by Old Juno, the ancient slave matriarch of the plantation. She is able to control Whitlaw through his terror of her supernatural powers.

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Whitlaw next proposes to the beautiful Selina Croft in New Orleans. When she learns that she is actually the great-granddaughter of Juno, her betrothed graciously offers to accept her as his mistress instead of wife. Unable to bear the fact that she is of mixed blood, Selina kills herself. Whitlaw is not overly distraught though, because he has gained what he really wants; Paradise Plantation. Believing that Whitlaw is to blame for her great-granddaughter's death, Juno orchestrates his murder. Aunt Clio takes over the plantation, and the reader is left to know that this is an improvement, despite Clio's belief that God ordained slavery, and that the Africans were a cursed race – a belief which Trollope had found many Americans to share. Lucy, Phebe and her husband Caesar, escape to Europe, and the reader is left to understand that only there can they live as equals.

Thus Fanny Trollope introduced the world to one heinous Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw, a man who exemplifies the arbitrariness and fallacy of white supremacy over blacks. Whitlaw is a despicable white American whose only claim to power lies in the color of his skin. Otherwise, he has no moral fiber, no noble characteristics, no estimable ethics, and no endearing personality or physical traits. However, Trollope did not depict him as a stock villain; his humanity is all too familiar. The reader actually gets to know him and understand how he grew up to be so abusive, and his behavior is depicted as not being too far removed from the propensity of any reader to imitate. That is why Trollope continually, cynically refers to him as “our hero”. We, her readers, are not allowed to excuse him as some “poor white trash” that poses no threat to us or fails to indict us. The man actually aspires to become a senator and then run for the presidency. Trollope does not depict him as being self-deluded but suggests that such a man might actually achieve such prominence in a place like America, especially since slavery has given him the unchecked power to do whatever he pleases with his fellow creatures. Whitlaw is, after all, a product of the “white law”, that grants absolute supremacy to one race over another.

Perhaps the reason why *JJW* was so effective as an anti-slavery novel was its graphic depiction of what other novelists barely mentioned: the uncontrolled, socially reprehensible, sexual violence routinely dealt out by white man to black women. The novel opens with a description of “yellow children”, and Trollope's sarcasm about how easily the two races can blend together into one. Whitlaw is not unusual in that he fathers children with his slaves. In fact he is named after the third president of the United States who sold several of his own children as slaves. Not wanting to witness the consequences of his lasciviousness, Whitlaw has instead separated these mulatto children from their mothers and sold them away. In another scene, the sadistic slaveholder delights in the prospects of catching a runaway: “She's a neat little craft of a nigger; and she'd skip handsome over them stumps younder.” When he catches her, he has her stripped and is about to flog her, but an elderly slave woman intervenes. However, Trollope does not allow readers voyeuristic pleasure of this atrocity. With nearly cinematic precision, she cuts away to several chapters about Edward and Lucy Bligh, white missionaries in the Natchez Trace, who preach to whites that blacks have souls and that God will hold the former accountable for what they are doing to their brothers. They preach to slaves about God's love for them, not as an inferior race, but as fellow humans of such great value, that He sent His son to die for them.

These dual messages must have moved Victorians, many of whom might previously have been unsure as to the value of blacks in God's eyes. If they had been aware of miscegenation, they might have assumed that blacks – since they were commonly perceived as barely sentient, not much more than animals –

practiced sex indiscriminately. Trollope's description of a white man attacking a God-fearing woman like the novel's Phebe must have dispelled their ignorance of black versus white morality. For Trollope's more innocent readers, it must have been revolting to learn that a white man was capable of such behavior.

Another historical significance of *JJW* is that it includes one of the earliest slave narrative related by an African American character. There were some slave narratives produced in London in the late eighteenth century, some written by ex-slaves (and many written with an amenuensis or "as told to", as these were often used by the Abolitionists to promote their cause) but these were not yet widely distributed. Although *JJW* focuses on the profligate white slaveholder, it also includes the story of Juno, a slave woman who commands the reader's respect. She is a woman with backbone and indignation who knows ways to command power within her world as a slave, without escaping and without being obsequious. To a nineteenth-century reader, Juno was a character that defied stereotypes of the "happy-go-lucky" slave and the jungle savage.

Thus Trollope's novel satirizes America's definition of liberty and its boast of a classless society. This is not only evident because of slavery, but also because of the capitalistic impulse that seems to purge men of humanity and ethics like Whitlaw and his father before him, Colonel Dart, the men in New Orleans, and an "upstanding" woman who runs a seamstress sweatshop that exploits and literally imprisons Lucy. Trollope gives a realistic perception of the ways of antebellum America, painted in strokes the likes of which one will not find in any other novel of the period short of perhaps Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Dickens' novel came out six years after *JJW* and twelve years after Trollope's non-fiction satire of America, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*).

The novel is important also for what it does with gender politics. Whitlaw is often reduced to a sniveling slug around women, and not just around Juno. The novel abounds with powerful women who subvert patriarchy and slavery. Furthermore, the novel, as Mary Carpenter points out in *Frances Trollope and the Novel of Social Change*, combines anti-agism with anti-racism through Juno, who is more than seventy years old. Whitlaw lives in terror of the old black woman when at most other times, he is a bully and tyrant to all who cross his path. Trollope was fifty-six when she wrote this novel. In fact, she did not start writing until she was fifty-two, but once she began, she would publish forty books, with her last at age seventy. She was literally climbing mountains when in her seventies. Trollope supported her own family and penned numerous novels, especially the Widow Barnaby series, that depict the older woman in possession of dignity, freedom unparalleled to women of other age groups and marital statuses, wisdom, cleverness, and intelligence that flew in the face of prevalent attitudes toward older women. The two most powerful characters in *JJW* are Juno and Aunt Clio, a spinster, who in her old age, manages to hide all of the good people from a lynch mob. Even more unique than validating the older woman, Frances Trollope validates the aged woman of color in *JJW*. Trollope's Juno is highly intelligent and literate, in stark contrast to the abolitionist representation of Mary Prince (*History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*; 1831) and to current European stereotypes about the "inequality" between the European and Negro mind.

Besides gender, *JJW* has much to say about: 1) the evangelical movement as portrayed through the brother and sister team of Edward and Lucy Bligh; 2) the conflict between cultures (old country vs. new) apparent through the Steinmark family in the novel; 3) hypocritical attitudes toward miscegenation poignantly depicted through Whitlaw's fiancé, Selina, who upon learning that she is actually the great-granddaughter of Juno, commits suicide; and 4) Trollope's comparison of American slavery to domestic slavery, more pronounced in *Domestic Manners*:

If the condition of the labourer be not superior to that of the English peasant, that of his wife and daughters is incomparably worse. It is they who are indeed the slaves of the soil. One has but to look at the wife of an American cottager, and ask her age, to be convinced that the life she leads is one of hardship, privation, and labour. It is rare to see a woman in this station who has reached the age of thirty, without losing every trace of youth and beauty. You continually see women with infants on their knee, that you feel sure are their grand-children, till some convincing proof of the contrary is displayed. . . . The horror of domestic service, which the reality of slavery, and the fable of equality, have generated, excludes the young women from that sure and most comfortable resource of decent English girls; and the consequence is, that with a most irreverent freedom of manner to the parents, the daughters are, to the full extent of the word, domestic slaves. (92-3)

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Perhaps the greatest distinction that can be attributed to Trollope's novel is that it provoked legislation in 1838 that ended once and for all slavery in British colonies. An act in 1833 was meant to abolish slavery in the colonies, but to ease the burden upon whites, it failed to emancipate slaves. Instead, slaves were forced to serve periods of indentured apprenticeships stipulated by their masters. In 1839 The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was formed to put pressure on other countries, including America, to make slavery illegal. Trollope's novel was immediately a success in Britain, going through three editions within the year. Judging from the plethora of reviews (largely shocked that a woman would so vilify the gentlemanly, American South and write with such vulgarity on subjects not suitable to women), one can deduce that the book had quite an effect. If for that reason alone, the novel stands as an important historic document. To the lover of literature, however, it offers up such wonderful gems that cannot be found in any other novel, and for that reason alone, one ought to know about the life and adventures of one Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw.

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Also published as: Lynch law: Or, The life and adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw

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