

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

© [Paul P. Reuben](#)

(To send an email, please click on my name above.)

Chapter 3: William Wells Brown (1814-1884)

Page Links: | [Primary Works](#) | [Selected Bibliography 1980-Present](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap 3: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List of Authors](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 1, 2008 |



Source: [PBS](#)

Achievements

William Wells Brown was the first African-American to publish a novel, a play, a travel book, a military study of his people, and a study of black sociology. Throughout his life he was committed to the abolition of slavery. He made eloquent speeches putting forward ideas for reform. Later in life he took up the cause of the temperance movement.

Primary Works

Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself, 1847, (1849 [E-Text](#)); *Three Years in Europe; or Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met*, 1852; *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, 1853; *The Escape; or, A Leap of Freedom. A Drama in Five Acts*, 1858; *Memoir of WWB, An American Bondman. Written by Himself*, 1859; *The Black Man. His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, 1863; *The Negro in the American Rebellion. His Heroism and His Fidelity*, 1867; *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race*, 1873; and *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People*, 1880.

Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

Ernest, John. *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004.

- - -. *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom: A Drama in Five Acts*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2001.

Levine, Robert S. ed. *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*. Boston: Bedford, 2000.

Nelson, Emmanuel S. ed. *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002.

- - -. *African American Authors, 1745-1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000.
William Wells Brown (1814-1884): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Rita Warda

William Wells Brown was the first African-American to write a novel, a play, and a travel book. He was born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1815. His father was the white owner of the plantation on which Brown was born.

Brown held many diverse jobs as a youth which provided him with firsthand knowledge of the slave era South which aided him in his writing. Brown escaped from slavery in January 1834. During his escape he received help from an Ohio Quaker named Wells Brown (whose name he adopted when he became a free man). After his refuge he taught himself how to read and write. Brown became an active abolitionist and activist in the anti-slavery movement while working for a journalist for the abolitionist cause.

He was also important in THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, which helped slaves escape to freedom in Canada. It was during this time that Brown married Elizabeth Schooner, a free black woman. They had three children together. After moving to Buffalo, Brown continued to participate in the UNDERGROUND RAILROAD and also spoke publicly on abolition, women's rights, peace and temperance.

In 1843 Brown was invited to lecture for the Anti-slavery Society and gained renown as a public figure. The American Peace Society chose him as their representative to the Peace Congress in Europe in 1849.

While Brown was in Europe he delivered over a thousand speeches and wrote some of his most important work, including the first African American novel *Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*.

He left Europe in 1854. In 1858 he published the first play by an African-American.

While Brown was in Europe his wife died.

In 1860 he married Annie Elizabeth Grey. Brown continued his political and literary activities. He was a major supporter of black recruitment efforts during the CIVIL WAR.

He continued to write many literary and historical works including *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, and *The Negro In American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity*. His final book *My Southern Home, or The South and Its People*, appeared in 1880.

It is important to note that Brown's importance in African-American literacy is not only based on his interesting stylistic blends of melodrama, documentary, abolitionist tract, political critique but also in his willingness to address the issues of sexual exploitation of female slaves. Interestingly enough, the novel implicates Thomas Jefferson in this practice. The novel also challenges the inconsistencies that fail to protect the human rights of millions of African-Americans. Brown was able to address such issues in his literary works that reached a broad audience.

In addition to writing his own works Brown was a contributor to Frederick Douglass's paper, *the Liberator*, and to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and the *London Daily News*. Brown died on Nov. 6, 1884 in his home in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

Sources

The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Biography. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1973.

Williams, Michael, ed. *The African American Encyclopedia*. New York: Marshall Lavendish Corp, 1993.

Salzman, Jack, ed. et al. *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*. New York: Simon and Schutser Macmillan, 1996.

MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 3: William Wells Brown." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. WWW URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap3/brown.html> (provide page date or date of your login).

| [Top](#) |