

## **Harriet Tubman Reconstructed : A Study of Marcy Heidish's *A Woman Called Moses*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Résumé:** *Cet article montre comment le texte de Marcy Heidish inscrit Harriet Tubman dans l'histoire américaine en fictionalisant son asservissement, son évasion vers le Nord anti-esclavagiste, sa lutte contre l'esclavage et son rôle de conducteur du Chemin de Fer Souterrain et de 'Moïse' des esclaves noirs.*

**Mots clé :** Chemin de fer souterrain anti-esclavage, conducteur, Moïse, évasion.

### **Introduction**

I would like to start this discussion on Marcy Heidish's novel by giving a brief explanation of the word 'Moses' which might seem somehow obscure to some readers. It is a direct reference to a black woman named Harriet Tubman who was born a slave in Maryland, Dorchester County around 1820, and who became popularly known as 'Moses' because, as a conductor of the Underground Railroad<sup>2</sup> she led more and more black slaves out of slavery. Moses is thus an allusion to the prophet Moses in the Bible, precisely in the Book of Exodus, who freed the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt. Moreover, the subtitle "A Novel Based on the Life of Harriet Tubman" suggests that the lifetime of this emblematic figure of American history is the primary source for this novel, and that Heidish's purpose is to produce a text which engages Harriet Tubman as a literary interlocutor. In the author's note to her novel

Heidish says that concerning Harriet Tubman's episodes of life, she expresses the discourse of history and fiction: "*This is of course a fictional work, but it is grounded in historical facts and follows the general outline of Harriet Tubman's life*" (Heidish, 1976, 303). What interests me in this study is especially what this novel owes to Harriet Tubman's life and how much this life may have influenced the author's imagination. I want to point to a few aspects of this novel that seem to me to constitute an intertextual relationship between imagination and reality. One might envision this intertextuality in terms of intertwining between fiction and History. Because the novel's structure is built on the protagonist's enslavement and her role as a conductor of the Underground Railroad, I will begin by examining the narrator's life as a slave. Then, I will study her achievement as an abolitionist.

### 1. The enslavement

In *A Woman Called Moses* Heidish has created a fictional character named Harriet Tubman who narrates the events of her life in the first-person singular, inviting a judgement from the reader on the historical<sup>3</sup> Harriet Tubman as subject/ narrator. Here the first person singular 'I' is both a narrator and a character of history. One might say that in this novel the 'I' is telling the story of 'I' (Fromilhague and Sancier, 2004, 13). Many first person singular devices are heavily underscored, for instance when the narrator recalls her life in Marse Doc's plantation with a passage consisting of the evocation of her whipping by Mc Cracken:

*It was the summer I must have been sixteen. (...) For a while afterwards all I could recollect of my whole life was McCracken grabbing the heavy iron weight of the counter scales, his arm snapping back, and a flash of white light as the pain exploded in my skull. Then There was darkness, a kind of breathing death that seemed forever, till the world began coming back, but only in pieces. (p. 37)*

Such a use of 'I' raises doubts about the fictional status of Heidish's novel, for it creates a textual ambiguity that echoes the real Harriet Tubman's involvement in the story. The abundance of references to the 'I' is overwhelming. It is necessary to call attention to this status of *A Woman Called Moses* as a disguised biography or a 'biofiction' in which the narrator and the real Harriet Tubman become one. The

term 'biofiction' should be understood as "*the intertwining between fiction and an individual's sequences of life expressed in a narrative*" (Evayoulou, 2007: 74).

Significantly, both the title of the novel and the text itself turn on the life of the historical Harriet Tubman and the role she played in the struggle against slavery in the mid-1800s. In fact, *A Woman Called Moses* is the story of Harriet Tubman, a narrator who relates her life experience as a slave in Master Edward Brodas' plantation. The work in this plantation is hard, the hours are long and worse, the slaves are often whipped. That plight gives her the idea to "buy her freedom". However, she is dissuaded from by her husband John Tubman who knows that she could not get the right to do so, because of her mother's past (she was a slave). It is thanks to a Quaker's help she succeeds to run away to Philadelphia where slavery does not exist. After her escape she returned to slaveholding states in the South many times to help other slaves escape by the Underground Railroad. Different trips she made there led hundreds of slaves to freedom, among them her own parents and sisters. That is why, as suggested by the title of the novel, she became the 'Moses' of black slaves.

The plantation in which the narrator lives belongs to Master Edward Brodas also called Marse Ed. The Character of Edward Brodas is modelled upon the historical Harriet Tubman's white master also called Edward, the name which, Heidish argues, "*remains consistent with the majority of historical sources*" (Heidish, 304). But Edward Brodas dies suddenly, and the narrator sees this death as the accomplishment of her prayers: "*Lord! Lord! I did it. I wished it on him*" (p.44). Then the plantation is taken over by Dr Anthony Thompson, another character who is modelled upon the historical Harriet Tubman's second master also called Anthony Thompson (Heidish, 304). What we are confronted with here is the place of the plantation in the slavery system. It obviously works as the main referent for slaveholders' wealth. Carlisle (1972: 73) defines the plantation as a big company in which slaves were working for their masters' profit and where many owners hoped to live as aristocrats. One understands why Marse Edward Brodas employs all necessary persons. For apart from the slaves there are two overseers and a nurse named Old Callie. During slavery, the overseer was a central figure in the plantation as evidenced by this passage:

*Owners often employed white overseers to direct the work. Since an overseer was subject to instant dismissal if the slave did not produce profit, he either forced the slaves to work or found himself without a job. The most successful overseer drove the slaves ruthlessly. (Carlisle, 1972: 73-74).*

In Edward Brodas' plantation there are two overseers: Shank and McCracken. Shank for example is described as "massive, bulging with muscles nearer to seven foot tall than six". (p. 30). He carried a lead-handle whip platted with wire to bully slaves. For instance the narrator is burdened by her memory of whippings: "I can still recall the first time I was whipped with the rawhide" (p. 24). Carlisle who is an historian says that the whip was "the most common instrument of corporal punishment" and that. "disobedient or slow slaves were beaten with either a rawhide whip about three feet long" (Carlisle, 1972: 74). The narrator recalls also how McCracken whipped her with an iron on the head, and how she suffered for a long time from sleeping spells (p.38). Here Heidish reconstructs an actual situation, for in the author's note to her novel, she stresses the biographical accuracy of the scene: "It should be noted that Harriet Tubman's sleeping spells are not my invention (...). Evidently, they were a form of chronic narcolepsy, a result of the injury to her head from the overseer's blow" (p. 304). Concerning these spells a biographer of Harriet Tubman writes:

*While she was still in her early teens, she suffered an injury that would follow her for the rest of her life. Always ready to stand up for someone else, Tubman blocked a doorway, for to protect another fieldhand from an angry overseer. The overseer picked up and threw a two-pound weight at the fieldhand. It fell short, striking Tubman on the head. She never fully recovered from the blow which subjected her to spells in which she would fall into a deep sleep<sup>4</sup>.*

This passage suggests that Heidish locates the authenticity and value of her account in a discourse that is presumed to be objective.

The author is concerned not only with the problematic of the overseers' violence, but also with the nothingness of black slave women who could not suckle their babies because overseers did not allow them to do so: "There was a suckling woman too, for the babies that lay in baskets hung from the lower branches of a tree (p. 18). The narrator recalls that the suckling woman "looked after us children who were too young for work, while our parents were out in the fields all day" (p. 18). Concerning the hire of slaves, one finds telling similarities between

the narrator and the historical Harriet Tubman. For one reads (on line) that *"at age of five or six she was hired out to a woman named Miss Suzan as a nursemaid<sup>5</sup>"* Heidish argues that that Miss Suzan *"appears in several sources concerning Harriet Tubman's life"* (p. 304). It is also instructive to note in what way the narrator relates her experience as a household servant at Cook's house. Since she has a direct contact with Mr Cook's family, she discovers whites who are *"patrollers hired to keep order in the district, catch runaway slaves"* (p. 21); she also realizes that whites were trash as she finds in Mr Cook's house *"chickens strutted in and out across the dirt floor, pecking at the food-crusted skillets by the hearth, and unwashed chamber pots were piled on the chest, next to a moth-eaten cloak"* (p. 21). Thus as readers, we must beware of what Carlisle describes as the opportunity house servants *"often had to outwit and confuse their white masters"* (Carlisle, 1972: 76).

Marcy Heidish's narrative suggests that what is told about the narrator is a faithful record of the historical Harriet Tubman's life. For it is reported (on line) that *"at age five or six, she [Harriet] began to work as a house servant<sup>6</sup>"*. Referring to the accuracy of Harriet Tubman's biographical details given in her novel, the author says that she read her heroine's experience ultimately from Sarah H. Bradford's pioneering biographies entitled *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) and *Harriet Tubman; The Moses of Her People* (1886) both of which contain personal interviews with Harriet Tubman herself (p. 303). Heidish's concern with slavery indicates that the reader must approach the discourse of the "real" as well as the discourse of the 'imaginary'. For example, the selling of slaves serves to intensify a clearly problematic commercial relationship between Edward Brodas and his slaves considered as mere goods:

*During the lean times when I was small, when the price of wheat and corn was dropping, and the tobacco plantings were commencing to ruin large stretches of soil in Maryland, it appeared Marse Ed. meant to get himself through by breeding and selling off slaves instead of crops. (p. 9)*

Thus, for example, Tilly, the narrator's sister is sold in very disastrous conditions: *"Tilly was roped around the waist to the other children, the grown slaves behind in a double row, braceleted and linked together with metal that gave off a dull kind of beautiful sheen."* (10). This passage gives a dramatic expression to the master/slave relationship, while simultaneously providing Heidish's text with a historical significance.

More subtle perhaps is the narrator's integration of the formal phenomenon of hires of black slaves to point out the atrocities of slavery. The narrator recalls how she was hired to three masters. Firstly, she was hired to James Cook as a house servant, secondly to master John Stewart as a field hand; and lastly, she worked with the Buck town Quaker as a house servant. Here the narrative takes the form of a series of events stressing the authority of white masters on black slaves. More important to the narrator in this sense is the moment she is hired to John Stewart, the master who, she believes, will make a spending opening to her contemplated project to save money and then to buy her freedom: "*John Stewart gave me my keep (...) I planted a yard garden out from my cabin, raising beans, greens, and little tobacco to sell in town*" (pp. 58-59). These agricultural activities are motivated as much by the narrator's sense of survival as by her urge to become free:

*Hope of buying freedom goaded me to work harder than any overseer or driver could. (...). In one year I was able to save more than I had reckoned on, by working like a madwoman and keeping clear of any Saturday night or Sunday big times.* (pp. 58-59).

The name of John Stewart appears as authentic in the author's note when she evokes Harriet Tubman's "*incidents with John Stewart and Dr Anthony Thompson*" (p. 304). These incidents, she argues, really happened in the historical Harriet Tubman's life. Another key to the narrator's quest for freedom is in her loan to the Buck town Quaker lady whose love for her prompts her desire of freedom. With this Quaker she senses herself as part of a family, and apparently begins to recognize the white lady's humanism:

*She gave me mending to do, darning as well as the wash, and she paid well. Almost more than the wages, I was glad of the labor. It kept me from pacing, gave me something to do with my angry nights (..) I was still saving money in the flour sack. Not much hope in that, but it was all I had.* (p. 86).

It is this reference to the Quaker lady which enables the author to evoke the role the Quakers played in the struggle against slavery. Here again Heidish's text is conform to historical truth for, as Claude Fohlen writes: "*les Quakers véhiculaient la conviction que l'esclavage était incompatible avec le christianisme.*" (Fohlen, 1998: 191).

Heidish's contextualization of Harriet Tubman's life in her novel is nowhere more evident than later, when the narrator meets a free black man named John Tubman who marries her. For actually, the historical Harriet Tubman had a marriage with a free negro also named John Tubman. As reported by the historian Gerda Lerner, around 1844, she [Harriet] married a free black named John Tubman and took his family name (for she was born Araminta Ross, then she adopted her mother's name, Harriet) (Lerner, 1975: 63). Then, Heidish informs the reader that her novel is grounded in the African American's experience. For example, she recalls the ceremony of her marriage with John Tubman: "*Amos said the ceremony (...) and two of my brothers stepped forward with the broom. They heeded it may be a foot above the ground, John and me joined hands, shut our eyes, and jumped over (...) and Amos said: Now you married*".(p.81). Heidish thus provides her story with a connecting link to historical truth that in traditional slave life, usually "Jumping the broom" was a device for authenticating and validating a marriage as evidenced by historians Tindal and Shi (1989: 364) : "*A common practice was the broom stick wedding in which the couple was married by simply jumping over a broom stick*". Although married to a free black, the narrator has not gained any measure of personal autonomy; "*He [Tubman] had free-papers on him; he could ramble around (...) while the farthest I could go was Cambridge, and then only with a pass, only with permission*" (p. 85). Heidish's insertion of the word "pass" into her discourse echoes the 1819 Virginian Black Code which stipulated that Blacks should be punished if they were arrested without their "free papers" or a pass:

*No slave should go from the tenements of his master or other person with whom he lives, without a pass or some letters taken, whereby from his master, employer or overseer: if he does it shall be lawful for any person, to apprehend and carry him before a justice of the place, to be by his order punished with stripes, or not, in his direction. (The Virginian Black Code of 1819 (quoted by Martin and Royot, 1995: 92).*

In this context, the narrator refers to the signing by President Fillmore of the Fugitive Slave Act which allowed slaveholders to arrest slaves in the Free states of America and to bring them back to their masters. The narrator's memory of this epoch remains largely historical:

*Soon after I'd started to work in the Underground Railroad, Congress and President Fillmore had sold their souls to the Devil by passing*

*and signing the Fugitive slave Act, which said that runaways found in the North were still their property, and could be seized and returned, all neat and legal.* (p. 149)

In this context the narrator recalls the story of a black slave named Thomas Sim who was sent back from Boston to Georgia, where he was badly beaten before a cheering crowd (p. 149). More ironic to the narrator is what she calls her imprisonment, a jail in which she believes to be, even after her marriage with a free Black: "*Being wedded to him somehow made me feel like a slave than ever, like in prison*" (p. 85). That kind of imprisonment, the narrator seems to imply, can be evaded only by escaping to the anti-slavery North by the Underground Railroad.

### 1.1. The escape

In *A Woman Called Moses* the issue of escape by the Underground Railroad stands out as a crucial part of the plot. In fact, Heidish's novel achieves much of its meaning through the narrator's escape to the North by the Underground Railroad. The author structures this novel in terms of the protagonist's enslavement, escape, and freedom. As such it is in its essence a kind of fugitive slave narrative, a fiction of factual representation based on one of the most shocking fugitive abolitionist cases that tore the United States apart in the 1800s. For Heidish's novel is not solely concerned with recreating the life of Harriet Tubman, a fugitive slave who was active in the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad; it also narrates the destinies of former slaves who ran away from the pro-slavery south to the anti-slavery north of the United States. The narrator is naturally burdened by her memory of bondage and by the need to get free of that burden. Like many slave narratives, *A Woman Called Moses* features many first-person accounts which reconstruct the history of the narrator's experiences, escape attempts, and struggles for the abolition of slavery.

Let me begin by looking at the narrator's escape. The reader is in fact told that thanks to a Quaker's advice, the narrator leaves Maryland County by night and goes to Choptank river in order to meet a boatman called 'the friend' who should lead her to the North. The Quaker knows that the journey is risky and tells the narrator: "*Remember, thee are journeying from midnight through hope to God be praised*" (p. 99). Here the Quaker's warning constructs a well known friendly behaviour linked to the Quakers' sympathy with black



fugitives. Unfortunately, the narrator does not meet the boatman at the river, but is advised by another Quaker who informs her that the way leads to Dover, "*where she would find a station of the Underground Railroad, and where there are friends and free negroes*" (p.99) who might help her to reach Philadelphia. The word "friends" figures into what can be seen as the most startling image of the Quakers that appeared during slavery, because they used to welcome and hide runaways in their houses. Thus, for example, the narrator is fascinated by the attitude of the Quaker lady who welcomes her: "*This stranger, this queer-spoken woman, was giving me something with eyes, and I saw a friend trapped in a white face.*" (p. 99). What the narrator cannot understand, of course, is how this Quaker can reconcile her capacity for loving a negro with the so-called superiority complex of the white man which pervaded every sphere of the Antebellum society. In fact, the image of a white woman who goes to this extreme to defy the Peculiar Institution is seen by the narrator as simply too powerful. In spite of this friendship, the narrator begins to think that there must have been another way out of her dilemma, for she decides to escape to Philadelphia. During this escape the narrator faces sufferings and the most terrifying of her fear to be caught by patrollers and their 'nigger -dogs'. But she puts these sufferings to the level of tests: a commitment to feel her capacity to escape bondage: "*This labor was not like any I'd done before. No master ordered me to it, I had chosen it. Somehow this felt akin to birthing -labor.*" (p. 102)

How then, will the narrator ever get free of patrollers and their nigger-dogs? The answer lies in the assertion that she makes about her encounter with another Quaker who hides her: "*I stayed buried under the Quaker's house for the better part of a week fevered and half delirious at first*" (p.109). This test of physical survival is both a challenge to white masters and a discovery of another shade of white peoples. For once in the Quaker's house she wonders about the hospitality of those particular white persons: "*Still I wondered why these white Quakers hid escaping slaves ; there could be nothing in it for them excepting a lot of trouble if anyone caught them*" (p. 110). This sentence seems to be particularly suggestive as it allows to understand the risks taken by the Quakers for the black slaves' cause. It is a sentimental way in which the author constructs the enormous achievement of the Quakers in the struggle against slavery.

By her decision to run away to Philadelphia, the narrator seems to be thinking that as a human being, she must be able to find an alternative between enslavement and freedom. The search for just such an alternative allows her to meet Thomas Garret, another

abolitionist who gives her new clothes, shoes, and shows her the way to Philadelphia. Thomas Garret informs her about the anti-slavery society existing in Philadelphia and about its leader named William Still. This man is for the narrator the best and most representative abolitionist: *"I always thanked the Lord for that friend, he was the best connected, boldest station keeper I ever met"* (p. 146). Then the narrator reports how, once in the North, she worked for this anti-slavery society as a distributor of food and clothes to the escaped slaves (pp. 127-130). The existence of this anti-slavery society is a historical evidence as shown by Franklin John Hope and Alfred Moss: *"Negroes were especially in organizing the American Anti-slavery Society. In Philadelphia Robert Purvis had charge of the first vigilance committee which was later headed by William Still."* (Franklin and Moss, 1988: 165)

What I call the similarity between the narrator and the historical Harriet Tubman is attested by the passage below which indicates that effectively, the latter ran away to Philadelphia: *"In 1849, in fear that she, along with the other slaves on the plantation was to be sold, Tubman resolved to run away to Philadelphia where she found work and saved money"* As one can see, the narrator's escape to Philadelphia parallels that of the historical Harriet Tubman. Thomas Garret and William Still the narrator meets when escaping are grounded in the History of the United States as great abolitionists. In this context Heidish gives her narrator the same courage, the same intelligence, and the same determination we find with the historical Harriet Tubman. These similarities between the narrator and the historical Harriet Tubman may also be found in the way both perform their strategies as conductors of the Underground Railroad.

## 1.2. The Conductor of The Underground Railroad

The most important task of a conductor was to lead fugitives from the South to the North and Canada. In order to highlight the role of a conductor of the Underground Railroad, the author brings the narrator to a resistance by making her join it. In this sense the text is marked by a historical concern with how the Promised Land, shifted from the Northern states of America such as Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio to Canada, and how the narrator plays her role as a conductor.

*I worked with trades people, market women, preachers, peddlers, roving barbers and rich benefactors, and I used them. I used everyone who*

*would be trusted to help my passengers with whatever might be given: shelter or supper, money, medicines, blankets...* (p. 142)

The narrator's extremely rebellious attitude toward slavery is attested by her secret relationships with station keepers such as Thomas Garret. By the time the narrator and the fugitives come to Garret's house, they are convinced that they have seen a "God given man": *"We lay sheltered in his secret room for three days, swathed in flannel, muffled in blankets, recovering, resting. Thomas dosed us, fed us, gave out fresh clothing, and arranged for our transport through Pennsylvania"* (p. 288). That Heidish does write of these things is testimony to the part played by Thomas Garret in the Underground Railroad. The narrator evokes for example money she received one day, through him, from a Scottish society that supported her action as a conductor: *"He [Garret] also passed along some much needed funds which had been sent me through him"* (p. 288). Through the middle chapters of the novel, the narrator reveals her secret contacts with other abolitionists: *"I met the great black abolitionists: men like William Still, Robert Purvis, David Ruggles, Stephen Myers, Jarm Loguen Lewis Hayden, and that giant of them all, Frederick Douglass"* (p.142). Heidish's novel offers some insight into the narrator's achievement as a conductor in portraying her struggle inherent in the acquisition of funds from people or societies ready to accept and believe in the slaves' cause:

*There wasn't time to trouble over disguises or keeping my cover, so I appeared openly in depots and stream-cars. There wasn't time to work till I'd raised the money I needed either, and I rushed into the New-York city anti-slavery Society with a single clear intention: to beg.* (p. 169)

This passage invites the reader to ask whether such behaviours are historically faithful. It is necessary to underline the truth that *"in 1858, after the Congress passed the Fugitive Act, making it illegal to help a runaway slave, the historical Harriet Tubman decided to join the Underground Railroad"*. It is also necessary to note that Harriet Tubman's relationship with Thomas Garret is not Heidish's invention. In fact *"Harriet Tubman was working with abolitionist Thomas Garret, a Quaker working in Wilmington and Delaware"*.

Perhaps what this novel tells us about the narrator's role as a conductor is best measured in terms of the necessity she feels to carry a rifle to threaten the frightened fugitives at moments of their extreme discouragement and desire to go back to their master's plantation:

*All eyes returned to me eleven pairs of fear-bright eyes fastened on my face, and the rifle resting in the crook of my elbow (...) I raised the rifle's muzzle high enough for all to see, and gestured with it toward the field beyond the boneyard's northern edge." (p.139).*

A very significant similarity between the narrator and the historical Harriet Tubman is that episode concerning the threatening of fugitives with a rifle, which is perfectly true in the context of Harriet Tubman's life, since Carlisle reports that the black conductor "*went armed and had to urge on at least one party of frightened slaves at gun point"* (Carlisle, 77). The evocation of Harriet Tubman's use of a gun to threaten fugitives appears also in Lerner's historical book: "*Elle [Harriet Tubman] portait toujours un pistolet qu'elle utilisait afin d'aiguillonner les fugitifs paresseux ou désespérés, leur disant ' tu seras libre ou tu mourras"* (Lerner, 1975: 63).

Another realistic ingredient of this novel is the relation the author establishes between the narrator's and Harriet Tubman's infallibility as conductors. On page 154, for example, the narrator says: "*I'd never run my train off the track or lost a passenger"*. This sentence reflects perfectly what Harriet Tubman herself has proudly declared: "*I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years and I can say what most conductors can't say-I never run my train off the track and I never lost a passenger"*,<sup>1</sup> Zeman and Kelly (1997, 55) report the same sentence, which, they argue, was said by Harriet Tubman: "*On my Underground Railroad I have never run my train off the track and I have never lost a passenger*<sup>10</sup>". Heidish's story uses Harriet Tubman's biography in more ways than one. For instance, it offers a fictionalization of the well known truth that the black abolitionist helped rescue around three hundred slaves; "*Nineteen times I went south for my people. By the grace of God I was able to deliver roundabouts three hundred souls in all, and some where along the way I came to be called Moses"* (p.151). This sentence is probably constructed from what is presented by historians zeman and Kelly as the achievement of Harriet Tubman as a conductor of the Underground Railroad : "*She [Harriet] became one of the most famous conductors in the Underground Railroad guiding more than 300 slaves to freedom"* (zeman and Kelly, 1997: 55).

*A Woman Called Moses* remains a historical novel, especially when viewed as Harriet Tubman's record of life. In fact, the narrator's actions are absolutely within the logic of Tubman's life. For example the narrator tells that once in Philadelphia, she "*began speaking at abolitionist meetings in Boston between raids"* (p. 157) The

scene in which the narrator's commitment is most charmingly dramatized occurs on page 158, when referring to her speech at Boston. Then the narrator recalls her meeting with John Brown at St. Catharines: "*He came to me in St Catharines while I was still between journeys. He came to find me in the woods where I was splitting timber...*" (p.195). It is during this encounter that John Brown tells the narrator that "*he had a plan to free the slaves a plan he called the great work of his life*" (p. 196). The phrase "great work" is a direct reference to October 16, 1859 when John Brown and twenty one followers captured the US arsenal at Harper Ferry, as the first step of his plan to liberate slaves.

There is no doubt that as an abolitionist and a conductor, Harriet Tubman took part in the Anti-slavery meetings and met John Brown<sup>11</sup>. In fact, in the author's note to her novel, Heidish argues that Harriet Tubman's relationship with Brown is not totally fictitious:

*My depiction of Tubman's relationship with John Brown is as close to historical veracity as possible This episode was pieced together from a wide variety of sources, owing to the dearth of records concerning Brown's private meetings with Tubman. These meetings are partially based on the letters of Brown and certain abolitionist, and on accounts of Frederick Douglass's meetings with John Brown. (p. 306)*

Another historical truth emerges through the slaveholders' reaction to the narrator's actions as abolitionist. In fact, as the result of her obstinacy, because her work is in violation of her society's racial norms, whites refuse to give blessing to her action, when they promise a 4000 dollars reward to anybody who would catch and bring her back to the American authorities. The narrator wonders about the fear she instils in white slaveholders: "*Twenty Thousand dollars! Some kind reward for a nigger that can't read and write!*" (p. 172). That scene about the reward is close to historical veracity, for Lerner (1976: 63), reports that in 1856, Tubman's capture would have brought a 4000\$ reward from the South.

## **Conclusion**

Significantly, Heidish's reference to Harriet Tubman as the main protagonist in her text suggests that she has recreated the historical Harriet Tubman and her era, allowing herself as an author, the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing both the enslavement and the achievement of the protagonist as an

abolitionist, while remaining within the bounds of what History has left us about the real Harriet Tubman. Since American History has closed all avenues to Harriet Tubman's actions, thoughts, and struggles; since her past has been enveloped in darkness, what Marcy Heidish has produced is really a work of reminiscence about a great black woman who has been forgotten by the collective memory of her country.

### Notes

- 1-Heidish, Mary. *A Woman Called Moses. A Novel Based on the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976)
- 2-The Underground Railroad was a secret route of evasion founded in 1831 by radical abolitionists to help fugitive Blacks who escaped from the South. It went from the South to Ohio and Canada. It was organized by freed blacks such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman. who were referred to as "conductors".
- 3-To avoid confusion in this text, Harriet Tubman (the protagonist) is referred to as the narrator, whereas the real Harriet Tubman is referred to as the historical Harriet Tubman.
- 4-The Free Encyclopedia: Harriet Tubman'' Accessible at:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet\\_tubman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet_tubman)
- 5-id.
- 6-id
- 7-''Harriet Tubman Life'' Accessible at: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html).
- 8-id.
- 9-The Free Encyclopedia, Harriet Tubman''. Accessible at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet\\_tubman/p.6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet_tubman/p.6).
- 10-Harriet Tubman''. Accessible at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/Harriet\\_Tubman/p.9](http://en.wikipedia.org/Harriet_Tubman/p.9)
- 11-John Brown was a white abolitionist who felt passionately and violently that he must personally fight to end slavery in the USA. So in 1856, he led the murder of five proslavery men. On October 16, 1859, he and twenty one followers captured the US arsenal at Harpers Ferry, as the first step in the liberation of slaves; but it was taken the next morning by Robert E. Lee. Brown was hanged on December 1859.

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**Abstract.** *This article shows how Marcy Heidish's narrative inscribes Harriet Tubman in American history by fictionalizing her enslavement, her escape to the anti-slavery North, her struggle against slavery, and her role as a 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad and as the 'Moses' of black slaves.*

**Key words:** Underground Railroad anti-slavery, conductor, Moses, escape.