Abstract

This thesis is concerned with literature connected with the abolition of slavery in British colonies. The thesis will treat the topic of the abolitionist movement from the perspective of social, cultural and literary history from the beginnings until the abolition of slavery in British colonies in the Caribbean in 1833 with the Slavery Abolition Act. The thesis will focus on the discourse of race and slavery. The chosen authors represent different opinions and perspectives as the discussion will focus on sentimental poetry, travel writings as well as slave narratives. The chief aim is to identify and define the strategies of abolitionist discourse and the rhetorical practices which it employed especially in shaping the image of Africans and how the hegemonic discourse of sentimentalism influenced their writing.

The first part of the thesis is concerned with establishing a theoretical background and the establishing of the literary traditions and customs of the eighteenth century, definition of the sentimental discourse and philosophies of the Enlightenment. This will be framed by a definition of Edward Said's “Orientalism” as well as Paul Gilroy's theory of the “Black Atlantic,” which will enable us to define the space between Britain, Africa and the Caribbean, where the history of slavery of Britain happened. The theoretical background will be supplemented with a historical overview of slavery and its abolition in Britain and its colonies.

The following chapters deal with the literary response to slavery in the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. The thesis does not deal with polemical writings such as sermons, articles and pamphlets written by the most prominent abolitionists, e.g. William Wilberforce, but with more literary and creative ones, in the sense of poetry, travel narratives and autobiographies etc. The discussion of poetry is based on examination of several poems by Thomas Day, William Cowper, Hannah More and William Blake. Each of these poets shows their approach to the topic of slavery, slave trade and abolition via the metaphors, tropes and discourse they relied on. This will be contrasted with a chapter on travel writings about colonial encounters written by James Ramsay and John Stedman. Not only will they show the difference in approach to the fore mentioned topic but also to the different opinions about the abolition of slavery be those who have experienced the situation in the West Indies, unlike the above mentioned poets. The last literary chapter is concerned with the genre of slave narratives with representatives such as Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano as well as letters by Ignatius Sancho. This chapter will serve to illustrate how these black authors became part of the abolitionist discourse, portrayed themselves and
how they began to establish Black British identity in the place of the diaspora of the British Empire.

The thesis will examine the difficult relationship between abolition and an adequate discourse, approach and also the problems that the popular sentimental discourse meant for the creation of the black identity in British literature in order for Africans to become part of the discourse, therefore equal members in society.