

The value of the
female slave
narrative as
demonstrated by
incidents in the life ...



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When students learn about abolition, they are typically introduced to significant texts written by historical literary figures such as Fredrick Douglass and William Wells Brown. However, the slave narrative genre is overwhelmingly comprised by male authors such as these. Slave narratives written by females are a critical addition to the story of slavery and the need for abolition because they provide insight into the unique methods of abuse and oppression for enslaved women, as seen in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, including forced motherhood and the emotional anguish that accompanied it.

Unlike the many enslaved females who were raped or forced to be a mistress by their masters, Harriet Jacobs was forced into motherhood in a rather unusual way. She procreated with a white man in the hopes that he would grow to care enough about her and their children to free them. She explained this decision when she wrote, " I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me" (144). She was never forced to conceive children by her master (though he sexual harass her verbally), but this excerpt makes it clear that Jacobs was being wounded by slavery in a different way, and viewed motherhood not as something to be desired but as a means of necessity. Becoming a mother may have been an independent decision, but having children and giving up her purity was still forced upon her under the conditions by which she lived. Further, the emotional pain with which she dealt from such a decision was immense, especially once her plan failed. The story of this pain could never have been

described in a man's slave narrative, making the text crucial to people's knowledge of the importance of abolition.

No matter what led to the conception of the offspring, Jacobs describes how the role of motherhood subjugated slave women in countless ways. Although Jacobs was in a unique position, one in which she could trust her children to her grandmother, she still exemplified the agony shared by slave mothers. For instance, the narrator endured ineffable misery for nearly a decade, during which she specified, "... I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (264). Jacobs, like most slave mothers, was in a situation in which she had to watch her children suffer from the cruelties of slavery but had little power to help them. For slave owners, children were just another way to ensure that female slaves would remain subordinate, as it was unlikely that a mother would ever abandon her kin. Children also made for new labor that slave owners did not have to purchase. Therefore, having children was made it much more difficult for enslaved women to escape from slavery. They either had to choose to leave their children behind or take their children with them, which makes the process even more complicated than if they were to try to do so on their own. Although Jacobs was able to escape despite being a mother, she was one of few enslaved women that did so successfully, and her narrative reveals how strenuous the operation proved to be. Only females could be capable of writing narratives that demonstrated the complexities of the enslaved woman's position such as this, and thus it is imperative for one's understanding of slavery and abolition that they be read.

By confessing to even the most intimate struggles of her life and showcasing many forms the oppression of women in slavery, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* epitomizes how imperative female slave narratives are to complete the story of slavery and abolition. In particular, Jacobs reveals how motherhood was used to keep enslaved women from attempting to escape. Moreover, the narrative discloses the emotional torment of the slave mother, whose children are legally no more her own than they are her master's. There has been little light shed on these lessons in the works of slave men, and those who have tried could have only done so through secondhand experience. To fully understand the horrors the corrupt system of slavery, it is essential that we include stories such as Harriet Jacobs' when we teach of the need for abolition.