

Neither black nor
white: the complex
concept of freedom in
incidents in the life ...



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Harriet Jacobs' moving text *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an incredible narrative chronicling the story of a slave named Linda and her resilient fight for freedom. However, as she takes us through her journey, we come to see that the concept of freedom is by no means a clear-cut, either-or entity. She associates the idea of freedom with different things throughout her journey: religion, certain places, the economy, even people, and through these different definitions and explorations, by the last chapter it becomes clear that freedom by no means has a singular definition. Rather, freedom is a process, a flexible concept, and a strong mindset, all of which are clearly exhibited throughout Linda's journey.

A recurring theme throughout Jacobs' text is religion and Christianity. She includes many biblical allusions, references to Christianity, and other mentions of God, church, and prayer, however, they are not the wholly reverential, spiritual, and positive references that one might expect. Linda clearly struggles with the meaning of religion and the role that it plays in her life. For her, it seems to be more of a process, rather than an object—not only is it inconsistent, but Jacobs articulates her experiences with slaveholders using Christianity and religion to legitimize the horrors they inflicted, and how they often manipulated the words of the Bible and religion to assert their authority. “[The slaveholders] seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who “made of one blood all nations of men!” (40) Linda's references to religion become increasingly bitter, as she begins to use the word ‘Christian’ in a sarcastic manner. “As Mrs. Flint went out,” Linda tells us, “Sally told her the reason Benny was lame was,

that a dog had bitten him. ' I'm glad of it,' replied she. ' I wish he had killed him. It would be good news to send to his mother. Her day will come. The dogs will grab her yet.' With these Christian words, she and her husband departed," (103). In Linda's story, " Christian" is used sarcastically, highlighting the acrimony that Linda feels about the role both religion and Christianity play in slavery. " I supposed," Linda reveals, " that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant," (65). Her negative reaction to religion seems completely legitimate when we see how religion itself is used as the foundation for her own enslavement. As confusing and contradictory as the idea of religion becomes in this text, the fact that it is associated with freedom actually highlights the similarities between the two. Religion is something that often provides escape or solace in the midst of difficulty, however; in this case it is used as a vehicle to enforce Linda's own enslavement and thus is an impediment on her road to freedom. Connecting religion to freedom in this way is an important piece of evidence in proving that both ideas are flexible, inconsistent, and very much up to interpretation.

The idea of freedom is explored not just through Linda's relationship with religion, but she also comes to associate freedom with specific places throughout her journey, with the meaning of freedom changing as she moves from place to place. She resides in many different physical places throughout the text—starting in North Carolina, she eventually flees to Philadelphia, then New York, then moves to Boston, then to England, then back to Boston, and finally the story concludes with the possibility of a move far west to California. Harriet Jacobs talks about freedom in terms of places

in a very abstract, intriguing way. One might assume just from hearing about the physical towns, cities, and states Linda experiences on her journey, that the story will automatically paint the southern places and northern places very differently. Though it is true that Linda sees the 'north' as a place of freedom while still living in her North Carolina town, her arrival in Philadelphia, then New York, and into Boston, do not automatically present her with the complete freedom that she was expecting. North Carolina itself is obviously the place providing the roots of Linda's enslavement, but it also is the place where she first embarks on her road to freedom, escaping from Dr. Flint and hiding out for years under his nose. After sitting in limbo between confinement and freedom still in North Carolina, Linda finally is able to escape by boat and is in awe upon her arrival in Philadelphia. "At daylight I heard women crying fresh fish, berries, radishes, and various other things. All this was new to me. I dressed myself at an early hour, and sat at the window to watch that unknown tide of life. Philadelphia seemed to me a wonderfully great place" (134). However, she comes to realize that the 'north'—Philadelphia, then New York, then Boston—are not the free cities of her dreams. She is constantly worried about being recognized, re-captured, and brought back into slavery, and with Jim Crow and the Fugitive Slave Law, she comes to the realization that there isn't as much of a difference between the north and south as she initially thought, holed up in North Carolina at the beginning of her perilous journey. Yet again, we see freedom compared to these places in the same nuanced sense of religion. These places are neither completely free nor completely confining, and arguments could be made about which places are better than the others. However, Linda's continued movement from place to place and desire to keep working towards gaining <https://assignbuster.com/neither-black-nor-white-the-complex-concept-of-freedom-in-incidents-in-the-life-of-a-slave-girl/>

more freedom for herself and her children highlights the adaptable and inconsistent nature of freedom.

Though many slaves achieved freedom through economic means—whether they somehow came up with enough money over their lifetime to buy themselves, or whether someone else bought their freedom for them—Linda does not believe that she should have to purchase her freedom. She comes to this realization as she matures through her journey and experiences. Early on in her story, she consoles her brother, lamenting that they will “ have to stay here all our days,” and hopelessly complaining, “we shall never be free.” Linda, however, responded by arguing, “ that we were growing older and stronger, and that perhaps we might, before long, be allowed to hire our own time, and then we could earn money to buy our freedom” (12). After enduring so many hardships and experiencing so much along her journey to freedom, however, Linda realizes and solidifies her belief in her own natural right to freedom—something that she, or anyone else, should have to buy. When Mr. Dodge, in the final chapter, arrives in New York to try and get Linda back, her friend tells him, “I have heard her say she would go to the ends of the earth, rather than pay any man or woman for her freedom, because she thinks she has a right to it” (161). This shift in Linda’s confidence and mindset about her own right to freedom reaches towards the point that freedom is a process in developing a certain mindset. It is not about reaching a certain physical place, or paying a specific amount of money—it is about having the strength, will, and belief in your own humanity to make the sacrifices to work toward ones own liberty. Throughout her journey, Linda associates the idea of freedom with many different people.

Her grandmother is one of the first people she describes as 'free,' and thus her grandmother plays a large part in the road to her own freedom—housing her, helping her escape, and ensuring the safety of her children, among other things. Her grandmother simultaneously seems to represent a sense of freedom, but Linda also clearly associates her with enslavement and confinement as well, given that she was essentially trapped her home in North Carolina for many years, in limbo between freedom and enslavement.

Linda also discusses the idea of freedom in accordance with her master, Dr. Flint. His manipulative, cruel, and predatory nature was described in detail, and though he technically offers Linda "a home and freedom" (70), she concedes that she "knew that my master's offer was a snare, and that if I entered it escape would be impossible...if he gave me free papers, they would be so managed as to have no legal value...even if I should kneel before him, and implore him to spare me, for the sake of my children, I knew he would spurn me with his foot, and my weakness would be his triumph" (71). For Linda, there is no achievement of freedom where Dr. Flint is concerned, and as the slave owner, comes to represent the absolute antithesis of freedom. "I had always been kindly treated," Linda notes, "until I came into the hands of Dr. Flint. I had never wished for freedom until then" (96). This highlights an interesting idea—though Dr. Flint characterizes the opposite of freedom, it is his emergence into Linda's life that gave her the first hopes of realizing her own freedom. Finally, the people that are most associated with freedom in Linda's story are her children. They serve as the ultimate motivation for her to continue on her path, and she mentions them and her commitment to their liberation every step of the way. "I was

dreaming of freedom...more for my children's sake than my own," she admitted. " I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom...every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms" (70). Linda's heartening dedication to her children and the passion they inspire within her point to the root of the relationship between people and freedom.

Even with Dr. Flint, who essentially represents the institution of slavery itself, Linda still used him as a person to motivate her on her journey to achieve freedom. Her grandmother and children play similar roles, showing us the reasoning behind the resilient mindset that forms the definition of freedom in this story. Linda's unwavering strength, will, belief, and desire to achieve freedom for herself and for the sake of her children follows her into the final chapter of her story. The final chapter of *Incidents* represents the continued struggle that characterizes freedom. The story ends without her achievement of outright, unadulterated liberty, as she announces that her " story ends with freedom...I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition." However, as Linda's journey proves to us; the institution of slavery does not allow for one to ever really have that pure, complete sense of freedom. " The dream of my life is not yet realized," she tells us, " I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far

more than my own” (164). By the last chapter, Linda has not attained the social, economic, or political freedom she had hoped for, but the hardships she faced throughout her journey did not sway her or stop her on her way to still trying to achieve a sense of autonomy.

Jacobs shows us that freedom, rather than being a tangible, physical, black-or-white entity, is a mindset. As we see through her exploration of freedom and its relation to religion, places, the economy, and people, it becomes clear that there is no clear-cut definition. Rather, freedom is the process, the journey, the decision to keep moving forward toward a better life for herself and her children. Freedom, as it relates to these different entities, is malleable, inconsistent, and largely intangible—like the interpretation of religion, or the unclear status of places in the north and south, or the cost of humans, or the people who are a part of Linda’s journey. She has achieved some freedom, but the road has by no means come to an end—thus, it is a continuous journey requiring the resilient mindset that Linda so explicitly exhibits.

Works Cited

Jacobs, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001. Print.