

Harriet jacobs' defiance of female conventions



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Harriet Jacobs' historically renowned narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the story of Linda Brent's struggles as a slave woman help to shed light on the unrealistic standards placed on women during the nineteenth century. As defined by Barbara Welter, the "Cult of True Womanhood" called for domesticity, piety, purity, and submissiveness in all women of the period. Propagated by popular magazines and literature of the time, Welter explains these traditions reassured Americans "in a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing remained the same - a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found" (151-52). Similarly, any woman not living according to such standards was deemed a "semi-woman" (173). Although slaves were considered inferior by default, the Cult of True Womanhood put additional pressure on black women to live up to societal customs. While in her narrative Jacobs does not shy away from structured traditions of femininity, she uses conventions of a 'true' woman to emphasize the impossibility for slave women to obtain such standards.

At the end of the narrative, Linda reminds her audience that she has not yet fully achieved her life's leading goal: to have a real home for herself and children. She stresses that although her "story ends in freedom," she still "long[s] for a hearthstone of [her] own, however humble" (152). As defined by Welter a "true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside - as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother" (162). Throughout the narrative, Linda Brent is confronted with her inability to participate in the same domestic world as her white counterparts. Lacking sufficient role

models in regard to True Womanhood, Linda's Aunt Martha becomes her only symbol of ideal domesticity. A freed slave, Aunt Martha has her own home and makes her money by selling baked goods to the community. Generally known as possessing "intelligence and good character," Aunt Martha comes as close to embodying ideas of True Womanhood as was possible for a black slave woman (131). However, Linda quickly realizes such domestic perfection is not so easily attained. Because of her slave master, Dr. Flint, she is unable to achieve True Womanhood. A result of sexual and emotional abuse, the plantation family becomes demoralized beyond salvation. As an example, the cottage Dr. Flint starts to build for Linda represents Jacobs' rejection of the Cult of True Womanhood. An opportunity for her to finally have a home of her own, Linda instead chooses marriage to escape the oppressive wrath of Dr. Flint. In this instance, Jacobs addresses men manipulating women and how they can work to overcome it. Although women were partially reliant on men to secure domesticity as well as purity, Brent's refusal to submit to Dr. Flint's advances emphasizes the implicit rebellion towards True Womanhood. In short, Linda Brent's rejection of Dr. Flint's cottage embodies Jacobs' critique on 19th century ideals of true women.

Before analyzing Jacobs' implicit critiques of pious virtues, it is important to realize the extent to which blacks were excluded from religion. From early on in Linda's life, she looks to God for answers but rarely finds fulfillment. In Chapter 2, Linda states that her "heart rebelled against God" following the death of her father (130). Throughout the narrative, Jacobs emphasizes the magnitude of exclusion blacks experienced regarding religion. Since blacks

were seen as sub-human, they were considered unable to achieve salvation to the extent of their white counterparts. Therefore, piety is not a practical or attainable virtue in regard to black women (or men). Yet in the nineteenth century, " religion or piety was the core of a woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (Welter 152). Linda Brent's direct refusal of piety can be seen when she discounts Aunt Martha's claims that slavery is a result of God's will, in addition to other instances where she believes God does not act in her best interest. By illustrating how slavery jeopardizes one's faith, Jacobs subtly comments on the unreasonableness of the Cult of True Womanhood.

Purity, linked to sexual identity, " was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order" (Welter 154). Likewise Jacobs, using sentimental language, appeals to her audience's emotions by expressing her desire to obtain the same pure virtues as her reader (mainly upper-class white women). However, she justifies her deviation from the Cult by explaining how her role as a slave compromises the unforgiving standards of True Womanhood. Furthermore, Jacobs illustrates the magnitude to which a woman's purity is endangered by white slave owners and their mistresses. From an early age Linda Brent's purity is violated by her master " resort[ing] to many means to accomplish his purposes" by " whisper[ing] foul words in [her] ear" and " peopling her mind with unclean images" (134). Avoiding direct confrontation with Dr. Flint, Brent chooses to remain protected and isolated by her family and the public in hope silence will preserve her purity. She explains, " I had escaped my dreaded fate by being in the midst of people" (136). However, as the narrative progresses Brent develops a more

explicit rebellion to the Cult of True Womanhood. For example, Linda deliberately prohibits Dr. Flint from furthering his sexual advances. Brent chooses her own marital partner and claims "there is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you" (137). Brent's choice of her own sexual partner wholly undermines the preconceived expectations of slave women. She makes it clear she chooses (as opposed to being chosen by) Mr. Sands and states, "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (137). It is the choice to make her own decisions concerning her sexual life that reveals her intrinsic agency, further affirming the claim that Jacobs seeks to discount the principles of True Womanhood. Since the Cult does not offer any hope for slave women to achieve purity, Brent settles on achieving personal dignity and sexual agency. At this point, it becomes evident that slave women are forced to neglect at least one element of the Cult of True Womanhood in order to protect another.

In the narrative, Harriet Jacobs uses characters besides Linda Brent to criticize the Cult's requirement for submission. For example, the first woman the reader learns of is "a maiden lady, seventy years old" who buys Aunt Martha's freedom at auction (132). With this action, she knowingly deters Dr. Flint from separating Aunt Martha from her family. With "a big heart overflowing with human kindness," the woman actively prevents Dr. Flint from controlling Aunt Martha's fate; thus, she defies the requirement for submission as mandated by the Cult of True Womanhood (132). From the outset, this example illustrates Jacobs' contempt for structured female standards. If it can be said Jacobs uses this woman to demonstrate rejection of patriarchal authority, it is clear she uses Mrs. Flint for just the opposite.

Immediately described as having “ nerves so strong that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped 'til the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash,” it is quickly evident she is passive to slaves' suffering and submissive to her husband's wrongdoings (132). Throughout the narrative, Mrs. Flint encapsulates all features of True Womanhood. Although Mrs. Flint is thoroughly aware of her husband's abuse towards female slaves, she does not address the abuse or try to attempt to stop it. Consequently, Brent (and presumably other female slaves) go unprotected from Dr. Flint's wrath. Ultimately Brent criticizes Mrs. Flint for being “ the mistress who ought to protect the helpless victim, [but] has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage” (134). By doing so, Jacobs illustrates how white women's submission to male power leads to continued mental and physical assaults on black women. Overall, Jacobs uses Mrs. Flint to show the the extremely negative consequences black women faced as a result of slave-holding women remaining vehemently submissive to their husbands.

On that note, it is obvious that Harriet Jacobs uses her narrative as a way to combat expectations of a True Woman in every aspect. Unable to live up to the same expectations as upper-class white women, many slaves faced the same predicament that is emphasized through Linda Brent. For Brent, her purity and domesticity is blatantly compromised by her slave owner (a common problem during the nineteenth century). For the same reason, Brent and other slave women could not obtain complete piousness and submissiveness. In addition to showing how black women were continually expected to abide by the same virtues as white women, Jacobs brings attention to why they could not. By detailing the continual events that

compromised her personal quest to achieve True Womanhood, Linda Brent shows exactly why slave women should not be “ judged by the same standard as others” (138).

Works Cited

Jacobs, Harriet. “ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.” *The Literature of the American South*. ed. William Andrews. New York: Norton, 1998. 125-153. Print.

Welter, Barbara. “ The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.” *American Quarterly* 18. 2 (1966): 151-174. Web. 25 February 2016.