Harriet jacobs and frederick douglass literature comparison essay

Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass have more in common than they have differences, yet their books sound quite distinct. They share a crucial set of experiences, in that they were both born into slavery, and lived for decades as enslaved persons. They also share a powerful anger against the system and the people who perpetrated this practice. They both use their narrative, in didactic fashion, to point out to the reader the injustices, inconsistencies, ridiculousness, and other deficits of slavery in the United States. They even share the literary influences and expectations that their time period imposed on most writers.

However, their different genders had an important and unavoidable impact on the way they could respond to their environment and condition, and on the effects that their life events had on them. This could not help but operate strongly on them personally, and on their writing, since, in that era, even for women of other races and conditions of life, gender was an all-important determinant of their role, their treatment, their choices, even their survival to advanced years. As a result, their narratives, in tone, in mood, in presentation of self, in degree and kind of analysis of the world around them, reflect these differences.

They also had a different experience of learning to read and write, and it seems plausible that this had an impact on the way they told their stories. Douglass had to fight and scheme and bribe to acquire his skills (Douglass 36). He associated reading and writing with the possibility of freedom, whereas Jacobs was taught in a more unstrained fashion, by her mistress (Jacobs 16). Later, Douglass deliberately tries to model himself on the speeches and essays in the Columbian Orator (Douglass 39). Jacobs had

fewer opportunities for reading of this sort, indeed, having spent so long in hiding in a dark garret (Jacobs 173). Her style is lively and forceful, but not as self-conscious as that of Douglass, who quotes poetry (perhaps from his favorite, The Columbian Orator, with abandon and enthusiasm (n. a., 19th Century Schoolbooks).

Frederick Douglass, places his name in the very title of his book. Harriet Jacobs chooses not to reveal her name in her title, concealing her identity under the veil of her role as a female, a “ slave girl”.

Harriet remembers and transmits dialogue in a more detailed and lifelike fashion than Douglass. This observation is at least partially supported by the vastly larger number of direct quotations in Jacobs’ narrative than in Douglass’, as much as 3 or 4 to 1. Perhaps this is because Jacobs simply has a better memory. Perhaps, on the other hand, she feels that her detailed recounting of small and large humiliations enhances her point that slaves are tortured emotionally on a minute-by-minute basis.

However, it is very tempting to note how men and women differently narrate events even today, and draw a parallel. Anecdotally, consider the way contemporary men and women recount what has transpired in a prior interaction. Is it not usually the case that a woman can reproduce a good bit of the dialogue; the he said, she said repartee of natural conversation, whereas a man often finds this sort of total recall of verbal sparring more of a challenge? Jacobs not only reproduces conversations, but also plausibly distinguishes between ‘ standard English’ and the English spoken by the enslaved persons to one another.

As an example, consider Harriet’s account of her decision to go with young Mr. Flint to the plantation with him and his bride:

“ On the decisive day the doctor came, and said he hoped I had made a wise choice.

“ I am ready to go to the plantation, sir,” I replied.

“ Have you thought how important your decision is to your children?” said he.

I told him I had.

“ Very well. Go to the plantation, and my curse go with you,” he replied. “ Your boy shall be put to work, and he shall soon be sold; and your girl shall be raised for the purpose of selling well. Go your own ways!” He left the room with curses, not to be repeated.” (Jacobs 129)

Compare that with the dialect reproduced in Harriet’s exchange with her helper Sally:

I replied, “ Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation to-morrow; and they will never sell them to any body so long as they have me in their power. Now, would you advise me to go back?”

“ No, chile, no,” answered she. “ When dey finds you is gone, dey won’t want de plague ob de chillern; but where is you going to hide? Dey knows ebery inch ob dis house.” (Jacobs 147)

Now, consider Douglass' recounting of an analogous exchange with a slave master:

My master and I had quite a number of differences. He found me unsuitable to his purpose. My city life, he said, had had a very pernicious effect upon me. (Douglass 56)

There are no equivalent pieces of vivid dialogue in dialect such as Jacobs shares, to be found in Douglass' work. He transmits the event, and even muses on the wider societal implications of a circumstance, as for example, in his digression on the pros and cons of the Underground Railroad. However, he does not share with us the conversations, for the most part. Is this not possibly a reflection of the different ways that men and women process interactions and memories?

Harriet dwells on the sexual abuse she experiences, since it affects her treatment and endangers her life, and risks her getting pregnant. Perhaps the summation of her message is reflected in the following passage:

" And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they

had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted" (Jacobs 83)

This is her apologia; if she had had the protection and sheltering from inappropriately adult ideas and actions that her era accorded to a free young girl, if she had had the prospect of marriage, as a free woman would have had, she contends, her actions would probably have been different. She would not have been the victim of attempted seduction, first by the slave owner, and then by Sands. She feels that her whole life has been " blighted" by these circumstances. In the opinion of some, publicizing the revolting sexual underbelly of the slave system was the main purpose of her autobiography, (Andrews)

She also expresses apologies, which fall with strange inappropriateness on a modern, liberated, ear. Today, we would acknowledge the terrible inequality in power and free agency that existed in her life. Here is an example of her persistent remorsefulness concerning her own behavior.

“ Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good character. Now, how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave. I had said, “ Let the storm beat! I will brave it till I die.” And now, how humiliated I felt!” (Jacobs 88)

This apology is presented in spite of her assertion several pages earlier that, “ I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.” (Jacobs 86)

Douglass, on the other hand, mentions and decries the practice sexual predation on page 3, and then in his description of his Aunt Hester’s beating at the hands of her master, but not much thereafter (Douglass 7). He is himself the likely product of such an involuntary sexual exploitation (Douglass 2). Perhaps this deters him from dwelling on this issue more. Additionally, since sexual abuse is not perpetrated on him personally, it does not form a continuing thread in his narrative, as it does in Jacobs’.

Frederick Douglass is also guilty of something that could be construed as wrong or improper; he fought his slave master, and drew blood from him. However, he has no shame or doubts over this, and in fact regards the incident as critical to his later salvation from bondage. He certainly makes no apology!

“ This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded

by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery.

I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped. ” (Douglass 72)

Finally, Douglass ends his narrative in triumph; of self-emancipation, of increased status as an abolitionist, and as a married man. He has won his way to the free state of Massachusetts, he has become the associate of persons such as William Lloyd Garrison, the publisher of the Liberator, and he is legally married to someone he admires and cherishes (Douglass 116). He is a person of some note, and taken seriously by the anti-slavery movement (n. a., William Lloyd Garrison). He is working for himself, and keeping the fruits of his labors (Douglass 116)

Jacobs, on the other hand, ends her narrative on a note of poignant longing. She acknowledges how far she has come, and how much she has accomplished, but she points out with bitter accuracy the remaining deficits in her life. Although she has her freedom, she is still a servant, and

separated from beloved family. She is not a married woman in her own eyes or society's.

" Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. 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. The dream of my life is not yet realized. 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 for my own" (Jacobs 302)

Furthermore, history tells us that her initial attempts to write and publish her story were unsuccessful. " Jacobs thought of enlisting the aid of the novel's author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in getting her own story published. But Stowe had little interest in any sort of creative partnership with Jacobs." (Andrews) This may not have been surprising, given the difficulties women had in gaining a public voice.

These two texts are powerful indictments of the evils of slavery. However, the two narrators have had quite different experiences, and their stories reflect this. How much effect did their difference in gender have on their story-telling? It could be a sizable effect.

They differ greatly in dialogue and specificity, the exact sort of recollection of emotion and tone in conversation at which women are anecdotally said to excel.

They differ greatly in the role and prominence of slave sexual abuse in their narrative.

Finally, their endings, and the way they assess their lives differ greatly along gender lines. Jacobs regrets not having a traditional family and the independence that such an arrangement often brings. Douglass glories in his accomplishments.

Both are touching and effective, using very personal stories to convey their message. Both are treasures of history, as well as literature. The role of gender in shaping their narratives must be considered, however.

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