

Incidents in the life of a slave girl: four phases of a slave narrative



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Slaves narratives are amongst the most personal, touching novels, for two of their purposes are to arouse sympathy and emphasize the cruelty of slave owners. Frequent themes of slave narratives include the quest to learn to read, abuses (physical and mental), the exposure of hypocrisy, the dashing of expectations, and destruction of family ties, all of which are included in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. There are four phases to a slave narrative, being the loss of innocence, the realization of alternatives and resolve to be free, escape, and finally, freedom. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs uses each of the four slave narrative phases for a specific purpose- collectively to allow those not involved to experience the slave owners' cruelties, the slaves' struggles, and realize that the road to choosing freedom was long and winding.

The first phase of a slave narrative is the loss of innocence. Linda Brent, the character that embodies everything Jacobs experienced, is born into slavery to loving parents who are extremely well off for a slave family. In the beginning, Linda Brent is in no way naive to her situation, but she is a child of innocence. Her parents give her a sense of self-worth. They taught her "to feel that she was a human being," strength many slaves never came to know (Jacobs 12). Eventually, Linda's mother dies and she is sent to live with her mother's mistress.

The mistress teaches Linda to read; however, before she can do more for Linda she dies and Linda eventually finds her way into the Flint family. Eventually, Dr. Flint begins pressuring Linda sexually; he threatens her and uses explicit language around her. Linda constantly evades his advances, but what she cannot run from is his wife's jealousy. Because of Flint's favoritism
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towards Brent, she is destined to live a more unpleasant life that had she been one of his least liked slaves. Later, in chapter ten, Brent flees to her last resort, which is entering into a sexual relationship with Mr.

Sands, with whom she later has two children. Upon making the defensive decision to have sex out of wedlock with Mr. Sands, Linda Brent sacrifices her innocence in order to maintain her innocence in the Flint household. It is ironic, but in order to stop Flint from threatening her innocence Brent had to give her innocence away to another man.

The second phase of a slave narrative is the realization of alternatives and the resolve to be free. Being free from slavery had been on Linda's mind constantly, but when her children begin suffering as well and their lives are put in danger is when Linda really begins searching for a way out. Her grandmother does tend to change her mind, telling her to remain focused on her children. When Linda realizes that her children are going to be sent back to the plantation, a source of danger, to be "broke in," she realizes she must act fast (Jacobs 80). Linda has expected her children to eventually be freed, especially since they were the offspring of Flint.

However, Flint did as slave owners were expected to do- he did not claim the children and instead was going to use them for labor and eventually profit.

Linda did not want her children to endure the pain with which she was enforced to live, and this was the inciting incident that catalyzed the quest of Brent's freedom. The loss of innocence phase and the realization of alternative and resolve to be free phase are sources of many common themes of a slave narrative. In the first phase, readers learn that Linda Brent

is taught to read by her mistress, and this is a major advantage to her situation. Without the skills of reading and writing, the escape phase is much more agonizing, for lack of communication skills can be the very crack in the foundation of a life of freedom. Also, readers receive actual recollections of abuse, both mental and physical.

Flint begins abusing Linda by polluting her mind and making her feel unclean. He then makes advances towards her and threatens her, abusing her mentally, emotionally, and sexually. When the masters threaten Linda's children, they are again abusing her, trying to bribe her to cave to their demands as a result to the fear they have instilled in her. As Linda once believed her children would one day breathe a free breath, she realizes Sands has no intentions of freeing her babies and as a result, her expectations are dashed. Through these heart wrenching tales of agony and despair, readers will side with Linda Brent and when feel compassion for slaves, the idea of abolition becomes real.

The third phase of a slave narrative is the escape. Escapes required an abundance of time and abundance of faith. With the help of many generous, brave friends and acquaintances, Linda Brent had places to hide from the Flints and everyone looking for the reward money they offered. Along the course of her escape, Linda experienced much pain, including poisonous animal bites, cramped hideaways, anxiety of being separated from her children, and fear of what the future held. While she was tucked away in her grandmother's crawlspace, her grandmother even invited a town official over in order to convince everyone that Linda was nowhere near.

For her children's sake, she even risks captivity in order to beg her children's safety of Mr. Sands. Linda then renews her resolve to flee and is later smuggled onto a ship Philadelphia bound. As witnessed this far, the escape was sometimes suspended in order to protect Linda and her family. Though she is finally on "free soil," Brent is not legally free and because of that cannot make money or help her children (Jacobs 131). Upon her employer's, Mrs.

Bruce's, death, Linda eventually spends ten months in England with Mr. Bruce, where she witnesses the true essence of Christianity and experiences no discrimination. Ultimately, Mr. Bruce buys Linda Brent's freedom. Though she had been away from the South for many years, she had just then been granted legal freedom. The escape part of the novel illustrates many themes of a slave narrative.

The destruction of family ties is a complicated theme that had the power to actually end a slave's aspiration to escape. Upon Linda's decision to flee, she realized she must forsake all family ties in order for her quest for freedom to succeed. She was torn from her children, her grandmother, aunts, uncles, and friends, yet she still found strength in the fact that once she was free she would be in a better position to ensure the freedom of others. The fourth and final phase of a slave narrative is freedom.

Though Brent experienced many benefits of free woman while first in the North, she lived in constant fear of the Flints. Freedom did not mean simply being in the North, it meant being set free legally by a slave's rightful

master. Once she was legally free of the Flints, Brent continued living with the Mr. Bruce.

She had a job and had her memories, which were now “ like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea” (Jacobs 164). Slave narratives are also important pieces of history that will forever be preserved. Hoping to aid in the remembrance of the slaves’ struggles and the preservation of an important time in American history, HBO made a documentary entitled *Unchained Melodies: Readings from the Slave Narratives*. This documentary, like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, presented themes common to slave narratives. The actors and actresses embodied the spirits of former slaves and painted perfect portraits of slave owner cruelty, which included death and torture, hypocrisy of the time, and the destruction of family ties. The slaves’ recollections of celebratory lashings and profitable family separations bring slavery to life in this hard truth documentary.

Slavery is now illegal, and many know very little of the actual incidents that took place in the American South. Regardless, it is still one of the most important eras, if not the most important, in history and it has shaped today’s society. Through Harriet Jacobs’ account in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the HBO documentary *Unchained Memories*, members of modern society are able to find the real truth, the actual foundation, of today’s thriving world.