

# Challenges of womanhood in "incidents in the life of a slave girl"



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Beyond the brutalities that all slaves endured, females suffered the additional anguish of sexual exploitation and the deprivation of motherhood. In "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," Harriet Jacobs focuses on racial subjugation but also gives voice to a different kind of captivity that men impose on women regardless of color. This form of bondage is not only exacted from women by men, but also accepted and perpetuated by women themselves. Jacobs' narrative gives a true account of the unique struggles of female slaves, a perspective that has received relatively little historical attention, and how even within this tremendously challenging situation one can strive for liberation. Community and personal relations are portrayed as a key element in shaping the female slave's experience. Jacobs attributes the success of her escape to a communal effort, but the importance of relationships in her narrative extends far beyond this aspect of her story. First, the slave mother's central concern is her relationship with her children. This relationship is the reason Jacobs does not escape when she might, but later it is the reason she becomes determined to do so. By emphasizing the importance of family and home throughout her narrative, Jacobs connects it to universal values with which her Northern readers will empathize. She goes on to point out that the happy home and family are those blessings from which slave women are excluded. Jacobs reveals that she was taught to read and spell by her first mistress. Her ability to read makes her vulnerable to her master's harassment; he begins pressing his immoral attentions on her through vulgar notes, which forces Jacobs to feign illiteracy. After Jacobs escapes to the North, her former master continues to harass her through letters, sometimes threatening her and other times attempting to lure her into returning. While her ability to read makes Jacobs vulnerable to her

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master's abuse, it is, nonetheless, a source of power for her. For example, even before she reaches the North she is able to arrange for her letters to be sent from several northern cities. Jacobs' decision to take a white man other than her master as a lover is more complex than a 'poor choice' that rejects virtue in favor of illicit sex. The choice of virtue and marriage is denied to her, and Jacobs' only opportunity for asserting her sovereignty lies in the act of choosing. She chooses one illicit union over another, explaining, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (71). Jacobs accepts responsibility for her choice, emphasizing that she "did it with a deliberate calculation" (70). While she aspires to the same ideals of virtue and purity as her white readers, she stresses that for the slave girl, and the conditions of slavery, this ideology is simply unattainable. Jacobs fully acknowledges her transgressions against conventional sexual morality when she was a slave girl. At the same time, however, she articulates an indisputable truth—that the morality of free white women has little ethical relevance or authority when applied to the situation of enslaved black women in the South. Even at the end of the narrative, after Jacobs is freed, she has not fulfilled her desire in attaining her own home. No longer legally bound to a white master, she still feels morally bound to the woman who has bought and freed her, and thus she remains a domestic servant in another woman's home. Jacobs identifies the institution of slavery as the source of misery and believes it to be the primary threat to the ideals of home and family that her readers value. The threat of slavery to the domestic ideal is most evident in its indifferent dismantling of slave families, separating

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parents from children for monetary gain. At the same time, Jacobs describes the misery that slavery causes in white slaveholding families, with the shameless acts of the master detracting from the morality and happiness of his entire family. Harriet Jacobs vividly depicts the horrors suffered by the female slave.