

The representation of womanhood in harriet jacobs' novel incidents in the life of...

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Incidents In The Life of A Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs was a powerful autobiography. Harriet Jacobs autobiography is captivating throughout the whole book. Harriet Jacobs knew how to intrigue the reader because with just the first line of the autobiography " I was born a slave..."(Jacobs 1), she had us hooked. The autobiography was very powerful because she talked about many issues that intrigue readers. One of the many issues she talked about in her story was womanhood. Womanhood was a big topic in her book because in the 1800's, especially as a slave, you had no womanhood. Your only choices were to cook, clean and take care of your master's kids. There is more to womanhood than just cooking, cleaning, and caring for kids. The theme of womanhood was so powerful because she knew that her audience was going to be majorly women. A woman's womanhood was not only questioned, but taken away from African American slaves. From the start of her life, Harriet Jacobs was bound to a life that she did not want and didn't even know existed. However, for white women, it was a different story. White women were born into families that owned slaves and they did not have to go through the struggles that African American slaves went through. " 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!"(Jacobs 58). This quote refers to when Dr. Flint wanted to build a house for Linda and him, so they could have sexual relations. Linda talks about how if she were a white woman, she would have had a different life and how white woman got what African American slaves hoped for, which was a house, the items they want and an actual childhood.

Womanhood for African American slaves was non-existent in the 1800's and throughout slavery. They were not seen as people but as property. In addition to being deprived of having the things white people were given, but they also were deprived of raising their own children. White women did not have to suffer the same way African American did. " I had no trust in thee, O Slavery! Never should I know peace till my children were emancipated with all due formalities of law"(Jacobs 154). This quote refers to when Linda had to send her kids away because Dr. Flint wanted them back. Linda would not give up until her children were free because they deserved their freedom, she did not want them to have the same fate that she had. Motherhood for a black woman was truly cruel because they could not take care of their own children. The black woman had to give up their children to slavery. They were not allowed to take care of and nurture their children. On the other hand, white women had their kids nurtured and taken care of by the same black slaves who just had their kids taken away. Additionally, black slaves womanhood was questioned a numerous amount of time in the autobiography *Incidents In The Life of A Slave Girl*. White women and black slaves led different lives in the 1800's. White women had their own womanhood issues, but not as severely as black slaves. White women could at least give their children a safe home, food every day and they would even get their own slaves assigned to them. Black slaves did not have any of those options. They had to be sold to different masters and were taken advantage of. The biggest issue to me besides the slavery was womanhood in Harriet Jacobs narrative. " Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery"(Jacobs

68). This quote refers to when Linda's baby boy had no name and how she could not name him after his father because he was not tied to the baby legally. This is also where the baby boy gets sick and Linda admits to "praying for his death"(Jacobs 68). Linda knew that the poor babies future was not bright. This part of the book was very impacting because it really hits the reader when she says she prayed for her son to die. No mother would wish death upon her children, but in this situation, the only two options were to be a slave and suffer for the remainder of your life or death. Death might seem like an easier way out, but to see your child die or be killed and not being able to watch them grow up is very hard. Neither of those two options was better than the other. The last part of womanhood that was represented in this book was sexuality. Sexuality has a big role in womanhood. It's important because choosing who you want to have sexual relations with should always be your choice, but in the 1800's slaves did not have a choice. The simplest things were taken away from black slaves. Choosing who you lose your virginity to wasn't even an option. In *Incidents In The Life of a Slave Girl*, Dr. Flint wanted to engage in sexual activity with Linda. He was so desperate that he started to construct a house for her. Linda decided she was going to choose the man who is going to take her virginity. She decided on a kind educated white man, Mr. Sands(Jacobs 59). For Linda to make that decision on her own and go through with it, it took a lot of courage. She did not want to lose her dignity, so she took matters into her own hands. The theme of womanhood in this narrative is very important to me because as a woman, I believe other women should have control of their lives. The slaves in the book had no freedom whatsoever.

They could not make any decisions like caring for their own children, choosing who to marry, choosing who to have sexual relations with, and where you lived. To other readers, it might not be a big deal that she made the decision to whom she was going to lose her virginity to and trying her best to get her children freed, but to me it is very important because I know people that couldn't make that choice. I have family members that were taken advantage of and then felt weak and had lost all of their dignity. But to read about a slave in the 1800's, willing to defend her womanhood and put her foot down was very empowering. Linda might not have been able to stick up for herself in every situation she was in, but she tried her best to defend herself and her children. Her courage to do anything possible like escaping from Dr. Flint is also very moving because even though she was afraid she still did what was necessary for the hope for a better life. This narrative by Harriet Jacobs was so moving and inspirational. Harriet Jacobs covers a lot of themes throughout her narrative, but the most intriguing theme was womanhood. A woman's womanhood is such an important thing in our lives. It is important because womanhood can be defined in many different ways. It can be described as our values, being able to reproduce, the qualities we have a woman, simple things like making our own decisions and the respect we show ourselves. While reading the book, I tried to put myself in the 1800's as a slave, but I can not even begin to imagine myself in their shoes. African American slaves suffered so much because of their race. When in reality it did not matter where you came from, but the way you represent yourself. Another important thing to remember about womanhood is to stick with one another. Women cannot continue to turn against one another.