

# The feminine ideal in female-directed works of literature



During the Victorian Period, women were “strongly encouraged to adopt attributes of purity, domesticity, and submissiveness” (Bland, Jr. 120). These values and ideals were projected into the writing of many different forms of female-directed literature. Harriet Jacobs’ “Life of a Slave Girl” is an example of a slave narrative intended to evoke sympathy from readers while simultaneously keeping them at a comfortable distance from the brutalities described in the text. Another example of this dichotomy is found in Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”, a feminist essay that defies the conventional antifeminist sentiments prevalent during the Victorian Age. Despite their differences, Jacobs’ and Woolf’s works are both aimed at a white female audience. The predominant difference between their works is that Jacobs’ writing conforms to the expectations of her readers by magnifying the attributes of purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, while Woolf breaks with convention and mocks these characteristics through the use of irony and sarcasm. A close reading “Life of a Slave Girl” and “A Room of One’s Own” reveals that both authors are targeting a predominantly female audience. This fact is almost startlingly obvious in Jacobs’s narrative, which directly addresses a female reader: “But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood” (Jacobs 54). This passage demonstrates that Jacobs is directing her narrative voice towards a female audience and, more specifically, that she hopes to target the “white, northern, female” (Fox-Genovese 7). The fact that she is trying to reach this group of people is exemplified by her writing style: she uses literary English and inserts quotation marks around grammatically “incorrect” slave dialogue. An interesting point to note is that when Jacobs herself is engaged in dialogue, she places quotation marks around her own words, but instead of <https://assignbuster.com/the-feminine-ideal-in-female-directed-works-of-literature/>

using ungrammatical dialogue as she does when transcribing the words of other slaves, she uses correct grammar. The following passage illustrates this point: "Don't run away Linda. Your grandmother is all bowed down wid trouble now." I replied, "Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation to-morrow; and they will never sell them to anybody so long as they have me in their power." (Jacobs 96) The first two lines are spoken by a slave and are characterized by a lack of grammar and incorrect spelling. Thereafter the protagonist, Linda Brent, speaks using correct grammar. This shows that Jacobs wants the reader to make a distinction between her and the slaves. Ultimately, she hopes to identify with the "white, northern, female", and wants to portray herself on the same level as them. Her writing style incorporates many of the "attitudes and assumptions of the Anglo-American literacy establishment" (Garfield 63). This is because Jacobs seeks to attract her target audience by magnifying values that are prominent in mainstream society while simultaneously creating a sympathetic relationship with the reader by incorporating these values into her narrative. The intention behind writing a slave narrative while conforming to the attitudes of white society is, as Frances Smith Foster notes, to "encourage Northern women to resist slavery" (63). Jacobs' abolitionist message might not have made such a great impact had she written her slave narrative using exclusively "incorrect" grammar and following the speech patterns of slave dialogue. Jacobs' anti-slavery message was not directed at the slaves themselves, but rather at the women of the North. By examining Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own", it is clear that she, too, hopes to attract a female audience. The line "What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?" (Woolf 21). The "our" and "us" refer

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to daughters, so it is evident that Woolf's text is directed toward women. Jane Marcus states that Woolf uses a "fictional narrative technique which demands open sisterhood as the stance of the reader" (Beja 158). This is reflected in the above quote, where Woolf engages the reader and asks a question that she does not herself answer. This serves the dual purpose of forcing the reader to interact with the narrator and promoting critical thinking. Furthermore, this is an example of Woolf's willingness to defy the "prevalent fashion among the intelligentsia": her writing breaks from the conventions of the Victorian Age and produces a feminist text when feminism was unfashionable (156). While both Jacobs and Woolf target a white female audience, they do so with vastly different intentions. Jacobs tries to relate to the white Northern woman by magnifying their values and writing in mainstream ("literary") English. She presents an abolitionist view of life as a slave girl while evoking sympathy from her audience. She urges her readers to resist slavery and feel compassion towards those who still suffer in slavery. Woolf, on the other hand, mocks the same values that Jacobs reveres (purity, domesticity, and submissiveness) through sarcasm and irony. Woolf points out that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 4)<sup>2E</sup> This illustrates Woolf's belief that women are economically oppressed, and that their creativity is curtailed by this rampant oppression. The ideals and values of the Victorian Age are exemplified in "Life of a Slave Girl" because Jacobs incorporates many of these attributes into her writing. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claims that "Jacobs never shows Linda as beaten or raped, as dirty or disfigured" (7) so as to avoid tainting her narrative voice and her protagonist, Linda Brent. If she had done otherwise, she "would be labeled unacceptably illicit in Victorian

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America" (Garfield 81). Instead of explicitly describing the sexual abuse, she uses confession as a medium through which to reach her audience while preserving her pure identity. P. Gabrielle Forman references the line, " Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!", stating that " this passage acts to absolve [the reader] as much as it seeks to absolve Linda" (Jacobs 55; Garfield 81). The fact that Jacobs clears both herself and the white reader from the guilt of these horrible events shows that she is conforming to the Puritan values of the Victorian age by avoiding vivid descriptions of a situation's true brutality. She does this in an effort to convince her readers that although Linda Brent is a slave, she is nevertheless a woman, just like them (Fox-Genovese 7). Woolf does not undertake the challenging task of convincing her readers that she is like them, because this fact is already assumed. It is understood that Woolf, like her readers, is " pure". This, in essence, gives Woolf an advantage, because her readers can relate to her life, while they might have a harder time relating to Jacobs's life as a slave. This illuminates the fact that Woolf, as an upper-class woman, already has an established relationship with her audience, while Jacobs is trying to establish a largely artificial bond. This advantage allows Woolf to use irony and sarcasm to mock the conventions of the Victorian Age, while Jacobs's writing must conform to them. This disparity explains why Jacobs merely alludes to the many brutalities of slavery, rather than openly discussing them. Being a victim of sexual assault suggests that she is an object, rather than a " woman like them". Furthermore, this explains why P. Gabrielle Forman states that Jacobs absolves both the reader and herself. Jacobs wants to clear the reader of inherent guilt of being her enslaver and, in essence, be considered a woman. Had Jacobs described the brutality of <https://assignbuster.com/the-feminine-ideal-in-female-directed-works-of-literature/>

slavery in full detail, she would have lost the bond that she sought to establish with her readers, because she would have deviated from the Victorian standards of purity. This would have resulted in the alienation of her target audience, and her message to white northern women urging them to renounce slavery would have contained less meaning because the readers would be unable to relate to the author. By successfully shaping her story around the values of mass society, Jacobs is able to attract her target audience and deliver a powerful message urging upper-class women to resist slavery. As Jean Fagan Yellin notes in her introduction to Jacobs's autobiography, "a number of women in the South responded to Linda Brent's experience as a woman and mother over and above her experiences as a black woman and mother" (Bland Jr. 126). This illustrates Jacobs' ability to penetrate beyond her target audience but, more importantly, it shows that by conforming to the values of the Victorian age, Jacobs is able to effectively "mask" her blackness and evoke sympathy from her white readers. Jacobs' decision to espouse the ideal of motherhood throughout her writing elicits further sympathy from her readers. She magnifies the ideal of domesticity because "nineteenth-century bourgeois culture raised [motherhood] to unprecedented heights of sentimentality" (Fox-Genovese 4). Yellin's remark is corroborated when it becomes clear that using the theme of motherhood is an effective tool for relating to the reader. Since motherhood was such a pivotal role in the Victorian lifestyle, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese believes that "Jacobs has reshaped Linda Brent's memories of her mother for narrative purposes" (8). She relates this idea to Linda's lament over motherhood: "when I am gone from my children they cannot remember me with such satisfaction as I remembered my mother" (Jacobs 90). She argues that <https://assignbuster.com/the-feminine-ideal-in-female-directed-works-of-literature/>

although Linda could not possibly remember much of her mother, because she was only six years old when her mother died (Jacobs 6), such memories serve “ the important mission of sustaining the ideal of motherhood.” This shows that Jacobs upholds the values and ideals of the Victorian Period; in this case, the domestic ideal (Fox-Genovese 8). This example suggests that Jacobs might have fictionalized her writing slightly during the description of her mother. However, this minor deception enables her to attract her target audience by incorporating contemporary ideals into her writing. Timothy Dow Adams states that deviations from the hard truth in autobiographies are “ not just something that happens inevitably; rather, it is a highly strategic decision” (Adams X). If this principle is applied to Jacobs’ depiction of motherhood, it becomes evident that she chooses to lie because she hopes that by emphasizing the ideal of motherhood she will be able to establish a relationship with her audience. As noted earlier, Woolf does not have the challenging task of convincing her readers that she is like them; she already has an established relationship with her female audience. This gives Woolf the freedom to employ sarcasm when discussing the ideals that Jacobs glorifies. Instead of magnifying the ideal of domesticity, she asks her readers to question the character of their mothers: What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo? (Woolf 21) In this passage, Woolf engages her female audience by laughing at the conventions of domesticity, which place women at such an extraordinary economic disadvantage. She questions what women have been doing with their lives when, at the end, they have no money to show for it. Furthermore, because Woolf is able to relate to her readers she is free to express her

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belief that women have been too busy focusing on their appearance and “flaunting” themselves to have made any money of their own. This supports Woolf’s main argument, that “ a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 4). Woolf asserts that the economic oppression that hinders women’s creativity will be lifted only after women break the conventions of domesticity and gain financial independence. It is clear that Woolf rejects domesticity, while Jacobs values the feminine ideal. By examining the other ideals and values espoused during the Victorian Age, it becomes clear that this trend can be found in each authors’ text. Jacobs conforms to the idea of submissiveness by portraying herself as inferior, while Woolf makes sarcastic remarks about the inferiority of women. The following passage from Jacobs’s text illustrates this point: What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live. (Jacobs 44) This passage reveals that Jacobs is conforming to the ideal of submissiveness, because she says, “ I admit that the black man is inferior” (Jacobs 44). Clearly, Jacobs does not believe that the black man is truly inferior; she does, however, think that he is ignorant. He is ignorant because he continues to live in slavery, like his ancestors. She calls attention to this fact because it is not the black man’s fault that he is inferior; it is the institution of slavery that makes him so. Jacobs makes this claim subtly because she does not want to offend her target audience to the point where they are appalled by her directness. Instead, she hopes to present a gentler perspective on why the black man is inferior and evoke sympathy from her audience while urging the women of the North to indict slavery. Woolf mocks <https://assignbuster.com/the-feminine-ideal-in-female-directed-works-of-literature/>



the ideal of submissiveness through the use of sarcasm and irony, while Jacobs clearly does not. The following passage shows Woolf's willingness to mock the values of the Victorian Age: Women have served all these centuries as lookingglasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. (Woolf 35)An analysis of this passage reveals that Woolf is mocking the convention of submissiveness. She states that women are only tools that men use to boost their egos. She uses the metaphor of women being " looking-glasses", magnifying men to twice their size. By this, Woolf means that men see themselves as superior, and objectify women in order to ensure their inferiority. The passage does not have a submissive tone; it is, rather, remarkably biting and sarcastic. Woolf says sarcastically that the earth would not be civilized had it not been for man. She also writes that " The glories of all our wars would be unknown", essentially claiming that history would not exist had it not been for man. It is important to note her sarcastic tone, because Woolf is arguing the opposite of what she is actually writing. She does not believe that women have not contributed to the civilization of society; to the contrary, she argues that women are " looking-glasses" that have allowed themselves to become inferior. This supports Woolf's argument that women should seek economic independence so that men cannot rely on women to boost their egos. Another important ideal of the Victorian Age is purity. Jacobs portrays herself as physically pure, never describing any sexual encounters that might taint her narrative voice. She also emphasizes the fact that she is speaking truthfully to the reader:

another characteristic of purity. Telling the truth relates to the Victorian ideal  
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of purity because the truth is pure, while lies are tainted. In the following passages, Jacobs addresses the reader and emphasizes the fact that she is speaking candidly: "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery" (Jacobs 29); "Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of Southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth" (36). These lines illustrate the fact that Jacobs values the notion of truth. She stresses this value in order to get her audience to believe the stories she tells. She does not want her readers to think that she is creating "imaginary pictures of Southern homes". Instead, she wants her readers to understand the brutality of slavery, thereby conveying her message that "slavery is damnable" (23). It is evident that Jacobs emphasizes truth in hopes of conforming to the purity valued during the Victorian Age. Woolf, on the other hand, ridicules the notion of truth: I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece. (Woolf 4) In this passage, Woolf uses irony to mock the notion of truth. She says that she will not be able to give the reader a "nugget of pure truth" to "keep on the mantelpiece" (Woolf 4). This "nugget" represents her unrealistic, almost comical view of the notion of complete honesty. The use of sarcasm is evident because even if she tells the truth, it is impossible to place such an abstract concept on a mantelpiece. Although she does not explicitly express this belief, the underlying point that Woolf is trying to make is that women will never be able to tell the truth until they have broken the economic oppression that constrains them. This illustrates Woolf's willingness to defy the convention of purity, one of the primary values of the Victorian Age. A comparison of <https://assignbuster.com/the-feminine-ideal-in-female-directed-works-of-literature/>

Harriet Jacobs' "Life of a Slave Girl" and Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" reveals that while both authors target a female audience, Jacobs has the considerable challenge of convincing her reader that she is similar to them, while Woolf has an established bond with her readers and is thus accorded greater flexibility. This fact explains why Jacobs must adopt the Victorian values of purity, domesticity, and submissiveness in her text, while Woolf is free to openly mock these values. Jacobs invokes the values of mass society in order to convince her audience that she is a woman, just like them. By magnifying these ideals, she is able to establish a common ground with her reader. Woolf, on the other hand, already has this established bond, and can employ sarcasm and irony to mock the same attributes that Jacobs upholds. This permits Woolf to produce a feminist text that women can relate to, while incorporating her own style of comic irony. Works Cited: Adams, Timothy Dow. *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Beja, Morris. *Critical Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985. Bland, Jr., Sterling Lecater. *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000. Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Ghost Memories in the Narratives of African-American Women*. Jamaica: University Press, 1993. Garfield, Debora M., and Zafar, Rafia, ed. *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Cambridge: University Press, 1996. Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1989.