

Depiction of the
attitude to women
slaves in incidents in
the life of a slave gir...



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From the time of Ancient Egypt to the present day, millions of slaves have lived and died nameless for history. Their life did not belong to them, their bodies did not belong to them, and even more so they did not own their names, they were renamed as easily as their masters wanted. The brighter the history of those who remained in the memory of humanity is something more than the subject of buying and selling a “two-legged cattle”, powerless property. The first works that laid the foundation of African-American literature were the narrations of slaves. These are autobiographical narratives told to white copyist editors or written by the fugitive or liberated slaves themselves. Most often, the authors of such stories became men, but there are a small number of works of this genre written by women. They include *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, researched in this analysis using the comparative-stylistic method, the motivational and biographical methods.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was a black slave born in captivity from the outset of the 19th century. She was born in a family of the mulatto roofer and slave from the tavern, and they belonged to different owners. Harriet's mother passed when Harriet was six, and the mother's mistress took the baby to her upbringing. This was a colossal success for the future writer, because she learned to read with her mistress – in the narratives of slaves, the authors recall how could they learn to write and read, they certainly remember the first books or the letter they read; the most important books for them, symbolizing the letter itself, reflect on the role of literacy, letters, books in their lives. The mistress died when Harriet was twelve. Under the will, Harriet should have passed into the possession of the mother of the mistress, but

things changes so that Harriet found herself a slave to James Norcom. He harassed Harriet from the moment she got it into his property. He also denied her requests to marry anyone. In 1861, Harriet Jacobs published a book under a different name in which she frankly spoke about the rape of black slaves. She bitterly recalled how the masters talked about the Christian faith and virtues, but quietly violated the commandments when it came to slaves – the same Christians, and they confessed the faith at the insistence of the masters. Like the pagans of ancient Rome, many owners enjoyed bloody spectacles. And every slave owner, without exception, raped his slaves, considering his own children from the same slaves, considering them as not their own flesh and blood. The book came out incredibly scandalous – not because of the general information that was probably known to many, but because of its frank presentation.

In addition to black women, Irish and Gypsy women were constantly raped during the colonization of America. They were frankly used to get more black slaves, putting them under men from a very young age. The mulatto daughters of these European slaves were used in the same way and from the same years. By the nineteenth century, this practice had already disappeared, but its victims were thousands of girls and women – because of the greed of the slave traders and slave owners. Like any other type of narrative biography, the narrations of slaves were built according to certain rules. For example, in the genre of slave narratives, the authors of which were men, literacy becomes the main tool in the fight against the system. Harriet Jacobs departs from this rule and gives birth to another tradition,

which found its embodiment in the works of the next generations of female writers – African-American women.

The main idea that runs through the entire work of the author, is the idea of the incommensurability of the pain of many men and women survived in slavery. In her opinion, a woman is being a slave not because of subjected to all the trials that befell on men (overwork, hunger, flogging, and so on) but also becomes a victim of even more severe tortures, reserved by slave owners especially for her. According to Harriet, for women, slavery was much worse than for men, because they had much stronger suffering and humiliation, especially their own. By this torture, she means forced sexual slavery, which slaves were forced to endure. Even if their whole nature resisted this, in one way or another the hosts forced them to come to terms with another part of being in the South. Female authors try to reconsider these oppositions and prove (by the example of their heroines) that most of slaves did not embrace their fate imposed by slave owners, but retained their identity (both personal and ethnic). Slaveholders erased all possible sources of identification, even those that were given by nature, for example, gender and age. This practice began in childhood when slave children of both sexes walked almost naked due to lack of clothes, then adult men and women (not related by kinship) often slept in the same room. When evaluating a property, women were subjected to the same degrading examination as men. Most of men writers were silent about this side of slavery. They were forced to adhere to a defensive position so that with a careless word they would not cast a shadow over their entire race and preferred to avoid topics that could cause a negative attitude towards the

African-American race. Harriet Jacobs could not follow their example if she was going to truthfully describe her story, because the whole life of a woman slave fell under what was considered a taboo in white society. It is not surprising that, in describing the shameful practice of sexual violence, she does not name the specific names of women known to her, but simply uses the pronoun “ she” in a general sense. By Warner, Jacobs changed the names of cities and called all her familiars as fictitious names, because she believed that she acted humanly towards other people, besides that preserving their anonymity serves not only as a protection for runaway slaves and those who helped them, but also a proposal symbolic names in order to strengthen the role of certain figures.

Harriet Jacobs, as she was afraid of publicity, did not have the brass to publish her book under the real name, so she took the pseudonym Linda Brent, by whom her heroine became known. In her heroine, the writer shows another way to deal with the system. The very beginning of her narration differs from the models accepted then: after the first sentence, starting with “ I was born” followed a little story about parents, with the reference to the white father. She even did not change the first phrase, but then she speaks of the happiest time of her life – her childhood as she was six years old, when she when she still could not understand her social status, because lived in her family, surrounded by the love and care of black parents. The story bears its own emotional load, especially when it comes to a forbidden sexual relations with a man of white race and the torment caused by her shame. The narrative gives the life through the eyes of a slave, its existence and the world, with details concerning personal life and perception, time and

place, and the sequence of events. Harriet was a beautiful woman, which she often regretted, the Lord gave her beauty, but that turned out for her to be the greatest curse. The constant resistance that Harriet had to Dr. Flint did not mean that she did not pay attention to other men. How could a poor slave fight with her master and take over him? She decided to choose her own lover (a white unmarried man who showed interest in her), in this she felt something similar to freedom. She fell in love with her old friend, a free carpenter, who proposed to her and intended to buy her back. Harriet knew that Flint would not agree to sell her, and she would only marry a slave. Nevertheless, Harriet with trepidation asked Dr. Flint for permission to marry. According to Jacobs, Dr. Flint sprang upon her like a tiger and hit her very hard, her fear even did not enable her to control the anger because it was the very first time he had struck her, and when she had recovered, she exclaimed that she despises him. For almost a week after that, Dr. Flint looked at her very viciously and was silent. Soon, when he saw her talking to her lover on the street, he cursed her and beat her. Almost immediately Harriet repented, she was burned with shame, because, punishing the owner, she punished herself; because of her act, she lost what her relatives valued her for, humiliated herself, being the same as many other slaves. In desperation, Harriet asked her lover to move to a free state, saying that she would soon come to him with her brother. However, the flight was impossible. Harriet was under constant surveillance, she had no money. In the end, Harriet abandoned the dream and chose a different path for herself. The narrative is vibrantly emotional, it is rich with metaphors and comparisons: “ tendrils of the heart,” “ pious soul,” “ ruthless hand.” The descriptions are rather detailed, the sentences have an easy-to-understand

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construction used to convey emotions and feelings, images and phenomena. Author's use of the language shapes the mood of the narrative, she hoped that "the dark clouds around me would turn out a bright lining". She is very expressive, she constantly asks questions (including rhetorical), exclaims and helps to feel the atmosphere, to visit those places about which she tells. Of course, there is a place to be a certain "imposition" of author's experiences, however, it creates mood, conveys sensations. Some slaves committed suicide but someone found their shelter in faith.

Christianity turned out to be the religion of slaves in the South; religion provided the slaves not only ways to escape the trials of everyday life, but also the opportunity to establish themselves as individuals. That is why, for the Africans who found themselves in the New World, and their descendants, the first, for a long time, the Bible was the only and all-time book. Harriet Jacobs recalls how willingly, diligently and successfully, secretly from whites, under the real threat of cruel whips both for the teacher and for the student, Fifty-three-year-old Uncle Fred, who really wanted to learn to read the Bible, was learning to read, live by the word of God and be closer to God. Jacobs herself assesses literacy, the ability to read as "the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it". In the Bible, they, the newly converted Christians, sought the highest truth, God's revelation, Faith. The Christian religion and the Bible have had a profound effect on their worldview, moral values, life behavior, language, and artistic creation. Jacobs debunks the hypocritical religiosity of slave owners and contrasts it with the sincere, deep, humane faith of the slaves. The contrast that runs through the entire *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the true Christian virtues of her

grandmothers, and the basics of life Dr, Flint lived with – hypocrisy, pharisaism, greed, and cruelty. Jacobs devotes a separate chapter XIII to the problem “ Church and Christianity”, with spiritualism becoming a leitmotif, which satirically depicts Satan: “ Old Satan is one busy ole man; He rolls dem blocks all in my way; But Jesus is my bosom friend; He rolls dem blocks away.”.

Jacobs used the spiritual as a satirical setting for the episode, which she often recalls as the undeniable proof of the unrighteousness of slave owners. During the prayer meeting in the Methodist Church, which was led by a person who bought and sold slaves, who had fallen into the spiritual with brothers and sisters – the parishioners of his church, he instructed God to pray to an unhappy mother slave, who had her last child sold the day before. The voice of this miserable and the cry of the mother, the contrast of her true faith and deepest sorrow are his pompous and hypocritical teachings. The whole chapter is a convincing and emotional proof of a paradox: not illiterate slaves, but slave owners – pagans who do not know the moral commandments of Christ. It is known that the basis of self-identification is laid in childhood due to the child’s communication with parents and other family members. Relationships in the family play an important role in the development of a person; they help not only to self-determine but also simply to survive.

Female authors describe the lives and relationships of their parents since most of them have dark-skinned fathers (only M. Prince is the daughter of white), they know the family history (parents tell their children about the family members sold, preserving them, which means bonding relatives). On <https://assignbuster.com/depiction-of-the-attitude-to-women-slaves-in-incidents-in-the-life-of-a-slave-girl-by-harriet-jacobs/>

the pages of the narratives of female authors, various relatives are constantly mentioned who in word and deed try to teach the heroines how to live (first of all, it concerns the moral and religious aspect), to assist them. In case if the slave's mother died at an early age or they were early separated from each other, the image of the mother may appear to the daughter in visions and guide her, or some kind woman can replace the mother. It was Harriet's grandmother who taught her how to act, she talked with her about the need for moral and spiritual purity, respect for the laws of morality. With respect to relatives, the grandmother showed her granddaughter what family is and how to treat relatives. She worked tirelessly to redeem her child, the children in return took care of her and paid with the same love. Jacobs attempts to deconstruct the central opposition "white - black" and shows the discrepancy between the skin color and the inner essence expressed by this color, a simple juxtaposition of the adjectives "white" and "black" to describe one person: "This white-faced, black-hearted brother came near us". That is, she wants to show that the color of the skin does not determine the essence of a person, and that means such opposition is wrong. Also, in the stories of slaves written by female authors, we see heroines representing the community (that is, people who have managed to preserve ethnic identity). Even in slavery, they form their own identity under the influence of their family and the cultural heritage of the whole community; fighting to preserve self-esteem through faith, they decide to flee, first of all, for the sake of their children. As the result, Linda Brent in her work makes the family, kinship, and motherhood the main tools in the fight against slavery, the source from which a woman draws the strength to endure everything and fight to the end. She needed freedom only to be able

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to be a mother and lead a life worthy of respect. All the torment she went through, paid off a hundredfold when she saw her children from her shelter, which Dr. Flint had left with her grandmother because did not want to incur the expenses associated with them. Until her owner could reach her, he did not touch her children either, that is, they were safe, surrounded by the love and care of her loved ones.

Maternal love, supported by a strong character, becomes the main weapon of the girl in the fight against the owner. It was thoughts about children and care about them that pushed her to the decision to fight for freedom, because if she remained a slave, then she would have no rights to the children, and the owner could do whatever they wanted with them. Slavery deprived her of the simple joys of motherhood and the opportunity to lead a decent life, slavery was associated with the hardest trials, but it could not deprive her of the last and main consolation, comfort in her family. Other sources of struggle with the identity of a slave are religion and community among female authors. Most often, mothers teach their children to turn to God, because he is their comforter in grief and savior in a difficult situation: they have no other help. For them, God is not a formidable punishing judge, but a merciful savior.