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Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Addressing Emancipation and Its Societal Implications

Published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* examines the question of ownership, the contradictions between the laws of property and propriety and the implications of these topics on socially acceptable behavior. Throughout the book, recurring incidents of inherited property draw attention to the perpetual nature of slavery. Writing on the eve of the Civil War, Jacobs explores slavery as a system of inheritance for both whites and blacks. The children of wealthy whites inherit their fathers' plantations while black slaves' children are born into lives of servitude. Within the States, it is expected that white children will claim their fathers' and their fathers' fathers' physical property. This birthright forces them to adopt an economic and political institution that becomes increasingly difficult to break free from. For example, Dr. Flint repeatedly claims that he cannot sell Linda because she is his daughter's property. By emphasizing this point, Jacobs echoes the sentiment of being trapped; Linda is destined to belong to his daughter and young Miss Flint will retain ownership of Linda without having lifted a finger.

At the time of publication, the Union leaders were no longer debating about whether or not to abolish slavery. Instead, the underlying problem was how America was going to break out of this cyclic institution. Jacobs further explores this dilemma by

describing the social and political progress that needed to be made in order for America to succeed in overcoming the difficulties that the abolishment of slavery would bring.

Jacobs's account indicates that slavery is an ingrained part of society, both in the marketplace and within the home. Perhaps Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published serially from 1851-1852, influenced Jacob's discussion of slaves as commodities. Stowe discusses in detail the role of slavery in the marketplace and its economic significance. In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begins with a scene that emphasizes the monetary value of slaves. The two men, Mr. Haley and Mr. Shelby, discuss the value of Eliza, Mr. Shelby's slave in relation to other items of worth:

“Mr. Haley, she is not to be sold,” said Shelby. “My wife would not part with her for her weight in gold.”

“Ay, ay! women always say such things, cause they ha'n't no sort of calculation. Just show 'em how many watches, feathers, and trinkets, one's weight in gold would buy, and that alters the case, *I reckon.*” (47)

Similarly, Jacobs also emphasizes slavery's encroachment on every part of each individual's life, due to the South's reliance on slave labor. However, despite their dependence on this institution and way of life, it is slowly eroding their laws of propriety; slavery strains familial relations, questions owners' morality, and violates the sanctity of the home.

Traditionally viewed as a sanctuary, the home is a motif that frequently appears in *Incidents*. Jacobs presents several contrasting descriptions of the home and ironically, the home displays the contradictions between property and propriety. At times, Linda finds comfort in her grandmother's property; Aunt Martha's house is the location where she gives birth to her children, her children's primary residence prior to moving north, and the place where she seeks shelter from Dr. Flint. But houses are also represented as places of

imprisonment or confinement. Similarly, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe suggests that a house or specific area of a home can offer slaves a space to take ownership of activities and objects:

Let us enter the dwelling. The evening meal at the house is over, and Aunt Chloe, who presided over its preparation as head cook, has left to inferior officers in the kitchen the business of clearing away and washing dishes, and come out into her own snug territories...Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment under her well-starched checked turban, bearing on it, however, if we must confess it, a little of that tinge of self-consciousness which becomes the first cook of the neighborhood, as Aunt Chloe was universally held and acknowledged to be...A cook she certainly was, in the very bone and centre of her soul...Her corn-cake in all its varieties of hoe-cake, dodgers, muffins, and other species too numerous to mention, was a sublime mystery to all less practiced compounders; and she would shake her fat sides with honest pride and merriment, as she would narrate the fruitless efforts that one and another of her compeers had made to attain to her elevation. (61)

Ironically, Stowe depicts the kitchen as a safe and familiar location, but implies that this comfort is allowed because it serves the ultimate slaveholder goal of creating value from slave labor.

The concept of home is threatened by external forces that manifest themselves in violence and illegitimate children. Jacobs demonstrates the blurring of the divide between public and private and suggests that the middle-class's private sphere faces danger through several instances of territorial transgression. For example, Grandmother's house is violated by Dr. Flint and the search parties seeking Nat Turner. Jacobs describes the "white quilts on the beds" and the "rooms with flowers," using the color white and floral imagery to indicate an atmosphere of purity and innocence (55). These descriptions are then followed by the contrasting images of blood and blisters during the animalistic storming of the house: "The door was rudely pushed open; and in they tumbled, like a pack of hungry wolves. They snatched at every thing within their reach. Every box, trunk,

closet, and corner underwent a thorough examination. A box in one of the drawers containing some silver change was eagerly pounced upon. (56)” In a sense, the invaders deflower the house, violating the privacy and sacredness of a home. Later in the text, the reader is shown that Southern white homes also experience a form of intrusion, albeit a milder form. Even Linda’s unnamed benefactress, whose husband is a slave-owner, is not exempt from Dr. Flint’s relentless hunt. All of the homes are tainted by slavery or efforts to uphold and maintain the structure and power of slavery.

While physical disturbances in the home are a recurring theme in *Incidents*, Jacobs is more interested in the emotional aspect of these encroachments. Socially, it is accepted that male slave-owners tend to have sexual relations with their slaves. This is evident in that others recognize the similarity in appearances between the illegitimate children and their fathers (32). Yet, there is no legal way for the female slaves to claim their masters as the father of their children. Additionally, there are many incidents of male slave-owners selling off slaves with whom they have had sexual relations with and their children. This seems to be in contradiction with the laws of propriety and calls into question the extent of their supposed well-mannered behavior. In one instance, the male refuses to take responsibility for his actions and further denigrates the slave by selling her after he has no use for her. Furthermore, Jacobs presents these men as hypocrites who are perceived as highly-educated, genteel Christians in public. However, in the privacy of their homes, many of them are whispering inappropriate words into their slaves’ ears and participating in acts that contradict the tenets of the Bible.

Writing as a slave, Jacobs appeals to Northern white women by presenting the consequences of slavery on the white family. There are many instances of white women

denying their husbands activities, getting angry with their husbands and becoming jealous of their slaves. Jacobs suggests that ignorance is required of Southern woman to preserve appearances and shows that the problem of slavery is penetrating the private sphere of the white middle class:

The poor girls have romantic notions of a sunny clime, and of the flowering vines that all the year round shade a happy home. To what disappointments are they destined! The young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness. (33)

Again, Jacobs uses floral imagery to symbolize an innocence that these women possess prior to entering into their households and marriages. Their ideals of a home are then violently taken from them, which Jacobs illustrates using undertones of rape, depicting the ugly realities of middle-class marriages. In addition, Jacobs's utilizes a shift in narrative view to further communicate her point when Linda assumes Mrs. Flint's identity and voice:

She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed...I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slaveholders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances. The fire of her temper kindled from small sparks, and now the flame became so intense that the doctor was obliged to give up his intended arrangement. (31)

Jacobs's motive is to stir the emotions of her audience, provoking them to identify with the slaveholders' wives. Her vivid imagery promotes a sense of urgency intended to implore immediate thought and action. No longer is slavery just a public and economic

institution: now it uproots families. Young girls and children who overhear their parents arguing are no longer ignorant of their fathers' activities. She asks these women if they are willing to allow this perpetual cycle to continue to tear apart families, both black and white.

Jacobs's depiction of Dr. Flint's courtship of Linda seems particularly unusual and at times contradictory. On the one hand, Dr. Flint constantly reminds Linda of her status as a slave and verbally chastises her during his fits of jealousy. On the other hand, he makes lover-like promises that seem inconsistent with the laws of property and propriety. He offers to build her a house and creates the opportunity for her to become his mistress (47). The concept of giving property to propriety seems paradoxical and it is as though he cannot decide whether he views her more as an animal or as an object of desire. Dr. Flint's prolonged search for Linda following her disappearance suggests that he loves her. Not only does he go to New York three times, but he offers a black woman money for information about Linda (97). In a moment of clear desperation, he even solicits money from Linda's grandmother. Jacobs suggests that the middle class is confused about the appropriate treatment of their slaves and subtly proposes the existence of a sexual competition between slaves and their mistresses.

Jacobs's paradoxical presentation of the relationship between Dr. Flint and Linda asks her white female audience about the occurrences in their own homes. Northern white women should ask themselves if their husbands treat them similarly – if their spouses simultaneously objectify and woo them. Dr. Flint's refusal to allow anyone to punish her Linda also depicts his dominance over his wife. This problematic illustration of authority questions the role of the household matriarch. What is she entitled to do as both a legal

inferior to her husband and a superior to the slave? Jacobs suggests that the wife is powerless over such situations, yet she offers a counterexample when a woman and her slave Betty defy the rules of submission in concealing Linda in their home.

While Jacobs presents the existing problems of a racially divided system and its effects on social decorum and spheres of inhabitation, she continues the discussion of slavery by expanding her argument to a broader region. In discussing the Fugitive Slave Act and the assimilation difficulties slaves faced in the North, Jacobs anticipates post-Civil War questions regarding freed slaves.

As Maier, Smith, Keyssar, and Kevles describe in *Inventing America*, The Fugitive Slave Act, enacted as part of the Compromise of 1850, denied fugitive slaves the right to a trial by jury and permitted newly appointed federal commissioners, instead of judges, to hear cases (43). Additionally, those who returned slaves to his or her owner received a \$10 commission and citizens were liable to assist federal marshals in capturing suspected fugitives, or be subject to a \$1000 fine. The element of the Fugitive Slave Act that is most important in *Incidents* is the section that states that all runaway slaves, regardless of the date of their escape, were subject to these laws. A state's enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act placed an enormous burden of responsibility on its citizens. As Christina Accomando suggests, Jacobs's use of the Fugitive Slave Law "reframes the practice of slavery from a Southern tradition to a federal problem. This shift serves her call for activism, especially from Northern white women. She also wishes to indict the North for its own legal manifestations of racism" (241).

Jacobs shows that even in "free territory," slaves are not free. With the Fugitive Slave Law adopted by many states, the North is still aiding the continuance of slavery

(155). Jacobs implies that Northerners have an obligation to slaves and suggests that individuals who either assist in the enforcement of this law or fail to actively assist slaves are supporting the institution of slavery.

It is particularly important to note that several of the characters who assist Linda in the North are females. For example, Mrs. Bruce's kind assistance is against the law, but it is more significant that she is aware of her disobedience (158). She allows the subject of slavery to penetrate her own home and mixes private and public sentiments in assisting Linda. This depiction of women as moral angels is devised to appeal to an audience that may feel disempowered in their socially confining role. These heroes are able to defy laws without betraying their families and the cult of true womanhood and Jacobs suggests that her readers should aspire to emulate those women.

Harriet Jacobs presents a major problem that the United States faces just before the start of the Civil War: the North has abolished slavery, yet its citizens are not ready to accept the slaves as equals. Jacobs clearly supports the Southern abolition of slavery, but suggests that societal views will not differ immediately afterwards. The demoralizing treatment that she experiences in a Northern hotel, in the company of Mrs. Bruce, hints at the discriminatory problems that America will face for many years to come. Every aspect of life, including eating, traveling and working, will be difficult for blacks, even after their emancipation. When Mr. Sands takes Ellen to Brooklyn, Ellen's unhappiness and inability to integrate in school suggests that a legal change will only be the first step in America's progress towards racial equality (114, 118). Jacobs anticipates that one of the greatest difficulties blacks will face is in the work force. For example, despite Benny's intelligence, he is unable to become an apprentice after those around him become aware of

his race (151). In addition, Jacobs points out that many blacks in the North are working in white households in positions similar to those they held as slaves.

Jacobs's main question is, what will happen after we are able to escape the cyclical nature of slavery? She suggests that the deeply seeded resentment from the mistreatment and dehumanization of slaves will be difficult for new laws to amend. Her incorporation of a scene in which a slave named Luke takes his master's money upon the owner's decease, suggests that Southern white men owe the black man a debt that cannot begin to be repaid through monetary means (157). Moreover, it will be difficult for former slaves to integrate into a white society that does not see them as equals. Additionally, Jacobs poses a bigger problem for the white middle-class: how do these men and women reverse slavery's penetration into their private sphere? Jacobs's attempt to answer these questions is instrumental in enabling readers from all generations to understand the overarching issues related to emancipation and its effects on American society as a whole.

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