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Abolishing Slavery with the Female Narrative

Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* educates readers about slavery of the nineteenth century and exceptionally describes how slavery harms not only slaves but also slaveholders. Furthermore, Jacobs promotes the abolishment of slavery while detailing personal experiences as a slave. Bringing forth a female voice through the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents* allows for feminist analysis. Using impactful language, Jacobs’ narrative encourages female advocacy of abolition while discussing the issues of slavery and its affects on slaves and slaveholders.

A significant element of Linda Brent’s story comes in chapter six, “The Jealous Mistress,” where Mrs. Flint grows increasingly concerned about her husband’s behavior. Beginning to see Brent as a threat to the Flint family structure, Mrs. Flint’s trepidation only worsens. In a pathetic attempt to get information out of Linda, Mrs. Flint would come into her bedroom at night: “Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer” (1040). Portrayed through Jacobs’ words, Mrs. Flint’s futile efforts to get a confession could be seen as disturbing. The use of creating a nightly dark scene with a slaveholder’s wife “bending over” a black slave and whispering in her ear as her husband creates a unsettling image in the reader. Having a grown woman whispering into a slave’s ear while pretending to be her husband creates an uncomfortable scene. Jacobs’ use of this intimate and troubling language digs into how far Mrs. Flint is willing to go to attack this problem between her and her husband.

Linda decides, then, to confront Mrs. Flint about Dr. Flint’s behavior and sexual harassment. Though Linda is the victim of Dr. Flint’s actions, Mrs. Flint still puts blame and malice onto her instead of becoming angry and accusing her husband of his wrongful deeds. Instead of being upset at Mrs. Flint for not siding with her, Linda describes her thought process towards Mrs. Flint’s behavior in regards to the presented situation: “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. . . . I pitied Mrs. Flint. . . . She was completely foiled, and knew not how to proceed” (1039-40). The use of emotional language, Jacobs encourages the reader to understand her inner-thoughts. By using words such as ‘jealousy,’ ‘hatred,’ ‘kindness,’ ‘confidence,’ ‘blame,’ ‘pitied,’ and ‘foiled,’ Jacobs builds sympathy and empathy towards Mrs. Flint to demonstrate compassion and understanding. Jacobs, a target in Mrs. Flint’s eyes, is not returning the pain Mrs. Flint is reflecting onto her because she sees that slavery not only hurts the slaves but the families of the slaveholders as well; in other words, Jacobs sees Mrs. Flint as a victim of slavery as well.

Including this part about Dr. Flint’s harassment to her story, Jacobs calls forth two different female perspectives, which in turn influences female advocacy for slavery abolition. In this chapter, Jacobs discusses the viewpoint of white slaveholder’s wife, who has no power under her husband and is an indirect victim of his behavior, and the objectified black slave. Jacobs states “[Mrs. Flint] now tried the trick of accusing my master of crime, in my presence, and gave my name as the author of the accusation. To my utter astonishment, he replied, ‘I don’t believe it: but if she did acknowledge it, you tortured her into exposing me’” (1040). Using the slave’s viewpoint as the direct view emoting pity and female compassion towards Mrs. Flint, Jacobs illustrates the ideas of how slavery harms the slave and the slaveholder’s family. Sexually harassing a slave, Dr. Flint not only harms the slave by treating her inappropriately while blatantly denying it but also harms his marriage by desecrating his vows. This compassionate yet to-the-point piece within Jacobs’s narrative intentionally strengthens the female conversation of abolishing slavery.

Harriet Jacobs straightforwardly places the purpose and importance of abolishment within he narrative as well. In these instances, Jacobs tends to directly address the reader. Doing this intentionally, these cases of grabbing the audience’s undivided attention tend to capture the reader because now they are directly involved with the story. Within chapter ten, “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life,” Jacobs addresses the audience by the use of the word ‘you’ and why she dreams of abolishment:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (1044)

Using this graphic language and intimate conversation with the reader, Jacobs sheds light on the darker issues of slavery that many white folk would not see or choose to ignore since they are not slaves. The comparisons of slaves to chattel and property within laws and government allow the questioning of humanity and the problematic nature of slavery and its effect on slaves. Moreover, the image of a man’s presence being “the power of a hated tyrant” that causes one to ‘shudder’ and ‘tremble’ focuses on the idea of overwhelming male power and female oppression. The active use of verbs allows an intense feeling as Jacobs describes the emotions as the slaveholder approaches and interacts with the female slave. The use of ‘hated tyrant’ evokes a deep connotation of pain and corruption of a man who holds authority. This section of the narrative, as a whole, provides women readers a concentrated look at a woman’s perspective of someone who wishes for rights, has no protection from laws, and is taken advantage of by male power and dominance. These aspects warrant empathy and the deeper conversation to grow among the feminist community as well as abolishment supporters, and Jacobs’ use of literary elements and poignant diction to move the reader allows this to happen almost flawlessly.

The last chapter of Jacobs’s narrative, “Free at Last,” ends rather happily, but not without some mixed emotions. After hiding on a plantation, Linda Brent moves to the north to escape slavery. After catching the news that Mr. Dodge was coming to find and capture Linda Brent, she ran with her family towards New England. Mrs. Bruce, a woman who helped Linda Brent remain in hiding, wished to buy Linda’s freedom. Once receiving the information that Mrs. Bruce had bought her freedom, her immediate reaction was not exactly cheerful at first:

So I was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. . . . I well know the value of that bit of paper; but as much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it (1053).

This contradictory image of a now free slave reading the bill of sale for her freedom creates a moment of frustration. The moment of being freed is one that slaves dream about; therefor, Jacobs, describing this conflicted woman having been sold to be free, allows the reader to experience mixed feelings as well. The emphasis of the word ‘sold,’ and negatively connotated words alongside the positive event create a conflicted mood.

These emotions do subside as Linda Brent does begin to realize Mrs. Bruce did this out of love and respect for her. This heartwarming ending of Mrs. Bruce welcoming Linda to her home as a family member and free slave, with a combination of different feelings, further encourages the feminist promotion of abolition. The fact that Linda Brent must be sold to be free illuminates that there continues to be a critical need for human support among all people as well as the need for simple rights for all. Mrs. Bruce’s caring response to Linda returning home as a free slave provides a hopeful end: “‘O Linda, I’m *so* glad it’s over! . . . But I did not buy you for your services. . . . I should, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that you left me a free woman’” (1053). The use of the word ‘satisfaction’ sums up the ending of Jacobs’ narrative and freeing well. Although her story is a painful one, the ending alludes to improvement of life and a better future. The good intentions of Mrs. Bruce and the warming conclusion of the narrative also enforces the fact that abolishment allows for friendship, family, and good-natured humanity, which institution of slavery hinders.

Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* retains many key elements that not all slave narratives possess. In particular, the fact that Jacobs wrote this herself and contains a female view alongside a more psychological presence makes Jacobs’s story stand out among others. Jacobs’s narrative provides a more emotionally captivating account of events, providing an important documentation of a woman slave while also giving room for advocacy and discussion about the institution of slavery’s issues, its detrimental effects on the slave and slaveholders, and the benefits of abolishment.

Works Cited

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014. 1: 1032-1054.