

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

by Harriet Jacobs

written by Frank Hering

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Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. explain the function of an autobiographical narrator.
2. discuss the novel in relation to historical and literary-historical contexts.
3. identify rhetorical strategies and explain how they are used to persuade an intended audience.
4. examine the issue of gender roles in the development of characters and their relationships.
5. identify, examine, and discuss the use of imagery and figurative language (simile, metaphor, and symbolism).
6. analyze the author's use of tone, diction, voice, and perspective in the narration and in the dialogue.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORY OF THE TEXT:

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* appeared in 1861, after the Civil War had already begun. Since abolitionists assumed that the only use of a slave narrative was to arouse sympathy among whites, the book was seen as being published too late to have any social or political impact. Therefore, it received little public acclaim until it was rediscovered more than 100 years later, in the 1970s, as a result of the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and feminist scholarship in the universities.

Jacobs had tried to have her narrative published earlier. With her brother, Jacobs had already run an anti-slavery reading room in Rochester, New York, in the same building that housed the offices of Frederick Douglass's newspaper *The North Star*. There, she met and became friends with the important abolitionist Amy Post, who urged Jacobs to publish her story. Reluctant to reveal her painful private life to the public, Jacobs nevertheless began compiling her narrative in 1853, completing it in 1858. Jacobs had already tried to gain support for the publication of her manuscript from Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had become famous with her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead of agreeing to support the publication of the slave narrative, Stowe agreed only to include Jacobs's story in her upcoming book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Determined to tell her own story, Jacobs went to England with letters from her abolitionist friends, but returned home unsuccessful. She then found a Boston publisher, but he went bankrupt.

Another Boston publisher agreed to publish the book if it included a preface by Lydia Maria Child, a famous abolitionist, women's rights activist, opponent of American expansionism, Indian rights activist, novelist, and journalist. Perhaps best known for her authorship of "Over the River and Through the Woods," Child was a conspicuous anti-slavery activist, particularly in her 1833 book *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, which argued for the immediate emancipation of all slaves without compensation to slaveholders. She also explored the complex issues of slavery in fiction, such as "The Quadroons" (1842) and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843). Despite being a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society's executive committee and the editor of its newspaper, *The Standard*, Child left the Society because of the abolitionists' inability to work together as a cohesive unit and their constant arguing over the role of women in the Society. Child continued to write for many newspapers and periodicals promoting anti-slavery goals and equality for women. Child agreed to write the preface and to act as Jacobs's editor.

When this second publisher went bankrupt, Jacobs decided to purchase the plates of her book and publish it herself. It was finally published in 1861 by a third Boston printer, and in 1862, the English edition, *The Deeper Wrong*, was published in London. While her book may have been too late to incite the Civil War, Jacobs's was the first book-length narrative by an ex-slave that revealed the unique brutalities faced by enslaved women. While male narratives highlight their own daring escapes and heroic actions, Jacobs's narrative focuses on the "incidents" in her family life and addresses such social and political issues as the role of the church in slavery, the slaves' New Year's Day, what slaves were taught to think of the North, the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law on runaways, and the repercussions faced by slaves after Nat Turner's failed insurrection.

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION 6

Read the following passage from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Then, in a well-organized, well-supported essay, analyze how Jacobs organizes the chapter to convey her opinion of Northerners. Do not merely summarize the passage.

Slaveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men; but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity. I have spoken plain English. Pardon me. I cannot use a milder term. When they visit the north, and return home, they tell their slaves of the runaways they have seen, and describe them to be in the most deplorable condition. A slaveholder once told me that he had seen a runaway friend of mine in New York, and that she besought him to take her back to her master, for she was literally dying of starvation; that many days she had only one cold potato to eat, and at other times could get nothing at all. He said he refused to take her, because he knew her master would not thank him for bringing such a miserable wretch to his house. He ended by saying to me, "This is the punishment she brought on herself for running away from a kind master."

This whole story was false. I afterwards staid with that friend in New York, and found her in comfortable circumstances. She had never thought of such a thing as wishing to go back to slavery. Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worth while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom. It is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children. If those heathen in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos, they would think otherwise. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert themselves to become men and women.

But while the Free States sustain a law which hurls fugitives back into slavery, how can the slaves resolve to become men? There are some who strive to protect wives and daughters from the insults of their masters; but those who have such sentiments have had advantages above the general mass of slaves. They have been partially civilized and Christianized by favorable circumstances. Some are bold enough to *utter* such sentiments to their masters. O, that there were more of them!

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? 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; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. *They* do the work.

Southern gentlemen indulge in the most contemptuous expressions about the Yankees, while they, on their part, consent to do the vilest work for them, such as the ferocious bloodhounds and the despised negro-hunters are employed to do at home. When southerners go to the north, they are proud to do them honor; but the northern man is not welcome south of Mason and Dixon's line, unless he suppresses every thought and feeling at variance with their "peculiar institution." Nor is it enough to be silent.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Prefatory Material

1. How do the two epigraphs prepare readers for Harriet Jacobs's stated purpose in writing the narrative?

2. In the last paragraph of her Preface, why does Jacobs say she wants "to arouse" her readers to a "realizing sense" of the conditions of slavery, rather than say she wants "to inform" her readers so they will have "knowledge" of the conditions of slavery?

3. Compare the "Introduction by the Editor" to the "Preface by the Author." How do Lydia Maria Child's reasons for editing this slave narrative differ from Jacobs's reasons for writing it? Why do they differ?

4. What does Child mean when she says in her Introduction "some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction"? Why does she make this statement?

8. When Benjamin is taken away by a slave trader, who is forbidden to sell him until he is out of the state, Linda's grandmother has a friend in New Orleans who offers to buy him on her behalf. Jacobs then writes, "When he saw Benjamin, and stated his business, he thanked him; but said he preferred to wait a while before making the trader an offer. He knew he had tried to obtain a high price for him, and had invariably failed. This encouraged him to make another effort for freedom." The ambiguous pronouns in this sentence make it hard to understand. What is happening in this interaction?

9. According to Jacobs, Benjamin's second attempt at escaping from slavery is successful in part because he can pass for white. How does this ability influence his announcing to Phil, " 'I part with all my kindred' " ?

10. About Uncle Benjamin and his escape, Jacobs writes, "And so it proved. We never heard from him again." How does Jacobs communicate how Uncle Benjamin's example may affect her and her own thoughts of escaping from slavery?

11. Why does the chapter end with Linda's grandmother buying Phillip's freedom and with the two of them and Linda saying "He that is willing to be a slave, let him be a slave"?

Chapter X

1. Analyze the effect created by the anaphora in the following quotation: "I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death."

2. What is the effect of the adjective clause in the sentence, "I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet"?

3. How does the following sentence add to the characterization of Linda Brent: "I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him"?

4. Analyze the effect of the imagery used in this sentence: "I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss."

Chapter XXXI-XXXIII

1. How does the following passage contribute to the reader's understanding of how Linda views herself?

He was approaching a subject on which I was extremely sensitive ... I frankly told him some of the most important events of my life. It was painful for me to do it; but I would not deceive him. If he was desirous of being my friend, I thought he ought to know how far I was worthy of it.

2. In Chapter XXXI, how does Linda's reaction to the word "contempt" contribute to the reader's understanding of how she views herself?

3. Jacobs writes, in Chapter XXXI: "That night I sought my pillow with feelings I had never carried to it before. I verily believed myself to be a free woman." Then, the fire-bells ring. How might her reaction to the fire-bells foreshadow her future feelings about herself as a free woman?
