

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**

by Harriet Jacobs

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ISBN 978-1-60389-816-4  
Reorder No. 201630

## Notes

Originally published in 1861, this slave narrative was written by a female slave living in the antebellum South. The purpose of the narrative was to persuade Northern women that slavery was immoral because it prohibited female slaves from leading virtuous lives. In addition, the narrative argued that slavery corrupted the morality of the slaveholders themselves and was against the will of God.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics Edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published 2006.

## Objectives

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

1. discuss the author's purpose for writing this slave narrative and the publisher's reasons for including testimonials from prominent white people at the beginning and the end of the narrative.
2. define vocabulary words from the text.
3. cite incidents from the story to support the following themes:
  - Slavery promotes immorality for the slaveholders and for the slaves.
  - Slavery is inconsistent with the will of God.
4. discuss the ways female slaves are especially vulnerable to the inappropriate advances of their masters.
5. relate the significance of the following terms, dates, places, and events to slaves:
  - January 1<sup>st</sup>
  - Jim Crow Laws
  - Fugitive Slave Law
  - Mason-Dixon line
  - Johnkannaus
  - Nat Turner
6. discuss the following misconceptions northerners have about slavery and cite incidents from this narrative that disprove these ideas:
  - Slaves are incapable of leading independent lives productively.
  - Slaves have no right to or need for family ties. Their purpose on this earth is to wait on the family of the owner/master.
  - Slaves are naturally dishonest.
  - Slaves are naturally immoral.
  - It is useless to educate slaves because they are mentally inferior.
  - Slaves are happy and well respected just like members of the master's family.
7. point out instances of the following uses of language in the story: sarcasm or verbal irony, personification, and simile.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why does Linda give herself to Mr. Sands? How does Dr. Flint react to Linda's pregnancy?
2. Cite three incidents from the story illustrating that slavery corrupts the moral values of the slaves. Then cite three incidents from the story illustrating that slavery also corrupts the moral values of the slaveholders.
3. Contrast the way slaves spend New Years Day and Christmas Day with the way free whites celebrate these holidays.
4. What "sufferings and mortifications" is the author referring to in the following passage? Cite incidents from the story in your answer.

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (Pg. 92)

5. One of the themes of this narrative is that slavery is against the will of God. The author provides many incidents to support this theme. Select the incident you believe best illustrates this theme. Describe the incident and discuss the ways you believe it supports the theme.
6. Why do you suppose Jacobs devotes an entire chapter to the Fugitive Slave Law?
7. Who is Nat Turner? Do his activities harm or help the plight of the slave in the South? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.
8. Cite incidents from the narrative to illustrate each of the following misconceptions Northerners have about slavery.
  - Slaves are incapable of leading productive, independent lives.
  - Slaves have no right to or need of family ties.
  - Slaves are naturally immoral and dishonest.
  - Slaves do not have sufficient mental capacity to receive education.
  - Slaves are happy and well respected, just like members of the master's family.
9. Despite the testimonials at the beginning and the end of the narrative, some critics find some incidents less credible than others. Discuss the extent to which you find each of the following incidents credible, and as part of your discussion, comment on why you believe the author may have described the incident in this way.
  - Linda hides in a small loft room for seven years, without having contact with her children.
  - Linda leaves her children so she can travel to Europe.
  - Linda forgets about the prejudice of color during her ten-month stay in England.

# Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

## Preface and Introduction

### VOCABULARY

**abominations** – hateful or loathsome things or acts  
**conscientious** – hard-working, thorough  
**deficiencies** – things lacking, imperfections  
**degradation** – a disgrace, shame  
**diligently** – industriously, conscientiously  
**excrescences** – enlargements, outgrowths  
**exertion** – an effort, application  
**indecorum** – impropriety, unseemliness  
**narrative** – a sequence of events; an account  
**perpetual** – continuous, everlasting  
**persecuted** – wronged, mistreated, victimized  
**pertinent** – relevant, important  
**presumptuous** – arrogant, conceited; displaying unjustified confidence  
**trifling** – trivial, insignificant  
**veracity** – truthfulness, authenticity

1. What is Harriet Jacobs's stated purpose for writing this narrative?

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2. What three reasons does the editor give for Harriet Jacob's ability to write so well?

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## VII. The Lover.

### VOCABULARY

**defray** – to pay for  
**dissipated** – dissolved, scattered  
**emigrating** – leaving one region and settling in another  
**entreated** – pleaded, begged  
**exulted** – reveled, gloated, rejoiced  
**imprecations** – curses  
**insolence** – rudeness, disrespect  
**loquacious** – wordy, talkative  
**mortify** – to humiliate, shame  
**pious** – devout, virtuous

1. In the following passage, Linda writes about the attitudes of southern slaveholders:

“Moreover, my mistress, like many others, seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; that they were created merely to wait upon the family of the mistress.” (Pg. 48)

How does this attitude toward slaves prevent Linda from escaping Dr. Flint’s immoral advances?

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2. Why does Linda encourage her lover to go to Savannah without her and not to return?

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**XVII. The Flight.**

VOCABULARY

**constable** – a police officer  
**fervently** – passionately, ardently  
**malice** – hatred, wickedness  
**proposition** – a proposal or plan

1. What evidence is there that Linda’s escape plan is successful?

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2. Based on the reward poster, describe Linda.

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**XXVII. New Destination for the Children.**

VOCABULARY

**inclination** – tendency, preference  
**indignant** – angry, annoyed  
**invoke** – to appeal to; to call upon  
**supplicant** – one who petitions or pleads

1. Where is Ellen sent? Why does Linda agree to the arrangement?

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2. One of the themes of this narrative is that slavery is immoral and corrupts the morals of both the slaveholder. Find a passage in this chapter illustrating this idea.

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