

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

by Harriet Jacobs

written by Steve Weed

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Pre-Reading

1. In 1845, Frederick Douglass published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. It is an autobiography about his years as a slave and his eventual escape to the North. The book had an enormous impact on the abolitionist movement, and Douglass became a well-known anti-slavery activist and influential speaker. Certainly, Harriet Jacobs would have been familiar with Douglass's book as she wrote her own story, which was published in 1861.

At the library or online, find a detailed summary of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. After reading the summary, write two lists. In the first list, write down themes from Douglass's narrative that you think might be similar to Jacobs's narrative. In the second list, write down themes you think might be different in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* because Jacobs was a female slave, and Douglass was a male slave.

2. Although *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of many hundreds of slave narratives that were written during the antebellum period, it stands out because a woman wrote it. Slave narratives had a significant part in shaping how people in the United States viewed the issues of slavery.

Research the various forms of slave narratives, their structure, and their intended effect. After you completed your research, write a brief essay about slave narratives and their impact on the United States during the pre-Civil War era.

3. There is an expression that states, "Everyone has a story to tell." People write their autobiographies because they believe their life stories have an important message that can influence or help other people. Harriet Jacobs was reluctant to share her story due to the anguish it might cause her to recall her painful past. Eventually, she agreed to write the book because she could see how her story could help inform people about the horrendous conditions of the lives of female slaves.

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Imagine a publisher has approached you about writing your memoirs. Think about unique experiences you've had in your life or events that have taught you valuable lessons. Write a brief summary about what others might find interesting or how they might benefit from your personal story or aspects of your story. Then, write an outline of your autobiography. Be sure and create a title for your book as well.

4. From slave narratives through African American stories of the twenty-first century, a reoccurring theme in African American literature is the importance of education. Education is viewed as a means of liberation, independence, and personal and economic progress. Historically, African Americans have fought, even died, so that they and their children could receive high-quality schooling.

Freewrite for fifteen minutes about what education means to you and your goals in life. The following are some questions to consider, but you are not limited to them. Be sure to provide explanations for your responses.

- Do you enjoy learning?
- Is having an education something you would fight for?
- Do you take education for granted?
- Is it something you will use the rest of your life?

5. In her narrative, Jacobs spends much of her time writing about her quest for freedom. She explains that universal freedom would not only help the enslaved, but it would also improve the lives of slaveholders. It can be argued that her entire purpose in writing the autobiography was to impart to the reader that liberty is the only way to achieve human dignity.

Write your definition of the word "freedom." Create one that you think conveys everything you imagine the word should include. Feel free to use a format other than that found in a conventional dictionary.

Preface – Chapter VI

6. In the Preface and the Introduction by the Editor, Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) and L. Maria Child go to great lengths to assure the reader that the book is a genuine account of Brent's life. This type of statement encourages the reader to trust the truthfulness of story that will follow. Publishers knew that a white audience would doubt that a slave could write compelling, well-written, factual narratives. Therefore, to quell readers' doubts, all slave narratives, including Jacobs's, include letters of authentication written by respected white citizens.

Imagine a friend of any race or ethnicity has written a book, but the publisher has said that before it can be published, your friend needs to provide letters that state that the work is authentic. Write a letter that expresses why you believe your friend's life story is valid and worth reading.

7. Linda states that she did not realize she was a slave until the age of six because her mistress treated her so well. Her mistress went so far as to teach Linda how to read and write. Offering a slave educational instruction was unusual. Not until Linda's mistress died and the youngster was bequeathed to her mistress's sister's five-year-old daughter did Linda come to understand the brutality of slavery. Linda learned these difficult lessons from Dr. Flint, the father of her young owner, who proved to be strict and harsh with his slaves whom he viewed as mere property.

Imagine you are Linda, and you want to write a letter to your grandmother about your unhappiness in your new home. You know that Dr. Flint will be extremely angry with you for sending such notes. Imagine that you and your grandmother have invented your own alphabet, one only you two know, and that is how you communicate with each other. Invent your own alphabet. For each letter of the English alphabet, make an entirely new symbol of your own creation. Then, using your made-up alphabet, write two or three sentences to your grandmother about your terrible living situation.

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8. In the first two chapters, Linda describes her biological family and the family who owned them. Linda's grandmother, who people referred to as Aunt Martha, emerged as the most impressive figure. She was strong-willed, self-possessed, and respected by both the slave and white communities. The grandmother was told she would be freed upon her mistress's death. Instead, she was put on the auction block. Linda's grandmother was so respected that her mistress's sister bought her so that she could set her free.

Think about people in your community: family members, teachers, coaches, group leaders, etc. Who has had the most positive influence on you and the community? Describe this person and why you think her or she has had such a meaningful impact on others' lives.

9. Linda gives details about the difference between New Year's for slaves and New Year's for white people. She explains that while white people enjoyed themselves and planned the year to come, slaves were awaiting hiring day. Hiring day occurred on the 2nd of January, a day when slaves were expected to go to their new plantations with their new masters. Linda appealed to white female readers, asking them if they could comprehend the anguish slave mothers faced on the first day of each January, knowing that the next day, their children might be taken from them forever.

Imagine you are a white female reader living in the South at the time of the story. Putting yourself in that time-period and that setting, how would you respond to such an appeal? Describe in two or three paragraphs what you would do after reading Linda's plea.

10. Chapter IV opens with Linda explaining that through hard work and perseverance, her grandmother had purchased her own home. Her grandmother continued to sell her baked goods with the hope that she could buy her children's and grandchildren's freedom. Aunt Martha's relatives often visited her house for rest, warmth, and food, though they always had to return to their masters' homes. Linda's grandmother told her family that theirs was a hard life but they must trust that God had a plan for them. Linda and her Uncle Ben disagreed with her.

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People often do not agree about everything, even with those to whom they are closest. Do your family or friends have a firm belief in something that you don't share? If so, write a journal entry in which you explain what you disagree with and how this difference of opinion affects your relationship with your family or friends. If you do not have any major differences of opinion, imagine what it would be like. Then, write a journal entry as to whether your relationship with your family or friends would change. Why or why not?

11. Uncle Ben struck his master and ran away to avoid punishment. He was captured and imprisoned. The master wanted to make an example of Ben to the other slaves, showing them that it was not in their best interest to rebel or escape. For a time, Linda and her grandmother were able to visit Ben. However, he remained insolent, freeing himself of his chains and asking that they be sent to his master. Ben was then placed in another prison, where vermin crawled on him, and where Linda and her grandmother could not visit him. Eventually, Ben was sold, but he escaped again, and made it to New York City. His family never saw him again.

Ben was so unwilling to submit to the atrocities of slavery that he endured extreme hardships to earn his freedom. Based on what you know about Ben, write at least two paragraphs in which you speculate what happened to him after his meeting with Uncle Phillip. What was the rest of his life like? Be as detailed as possible. The following are just some of the questions you should consider as you formulate your theory:

- Did Ben remain free? If not, what happened to him?
- Where did he live?
- Did he start a family?
- Did he get a job?
- Did he ever try to contact his family?