



Researched Anaylsis

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In this paper, I analysis Harriett Jacobs' use of second-person point-of-view to establish a relationship with her audience in her autobiography, *Incidents of a Slave Girl*. I use primary as well as secondary sources to support my argument that addressing the reader personally helps create and maintain trust throughout the novel.

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Importance of Second-Person Point of View in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents of a Slave Girl*

In Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs takes the reader through the hardships and obstacles she faced as a young, female slave before she found her freedom. She was born into slavery in 1813 and didn't escape her abusive master until 22 years later. After Jacobs ran away, she hid in a small closet for seven years before she was finally able to board a ship and sail to the free North. In her memoir, there are multiple instances where the events Jacobs recounts may be difficult to believe for modern audiences as well as 19th century audiences that have never experienced slavery firsthand. Jacobs understood when she started writing her story that if she wanted to appeal to her intended audience, the free women of the North, she needed a way to convince them about the harsh realities of the life as a slave. Throughout her emotional and discomfoting story, Jacobs switches between first and second person to establish and maintain a relationship built on trust between herself and her reader. By doing this, she also captures the reader's attention that forces them confront the horrible reality of slavery.

Jacobs' first step in developing a meaningful relationship with her reader is establishing trust. The entire preface of *Incidents of a Slave Girl* focuses on acknowledging how some of her stories would be unimaginable for people who were not aware of the harsh lives slaves endured. In the very first sentence, Jacobs writes, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" (Jacobs, 5), beginning her long attempt at showing the reader she is a reliable author. By beginning the

novel with a statement about her reliability, she makes the first “interaction” between her and her audience establish ethos which she will continue to build on for the rest of the novel. She concludes the preface by saying she has no motive to lie to her readers but that her readers should also take into account that she is writing this 27 years after she escaped. Jacobs concedes that some of the specifics of the period are not exact due to trauma and such a large gap of time between her escape and when she wrote *Incidents of a Slave Girl*. She uses anonymous names for the people and places involved which helps her build an understanding empathetic relationship with her reader. Without this significant preface, it is possible that many people reading her novel would have lost interest and confidence that her life story was actually true.

Using anonymity as well as the pseudonym, Linda Brent, throughout her novel was a decision Harriet Jacobs made to protect herself and her loved ones in case the slave owners from her home read her accounts and tried to “reclaim her”. She was also afraid that they would punish the people that helped her escape. Some historians, such as Pace University professor, Jean Yellin, believe that Jacobs used a pseudonym because, “in order to tell a difficult story, she couldn’t write as Harriett... and Linda could write it.” (Yellin). This acknowledges the mental limitations Jacobs had when handling her traumatic past as a slave. Yellin also argues that the use of a pseudonym helped Jacobs handle publishing to an audience of women the fact that “she had children and wasn't a legal wife was a shameful thing.” (Yellin). Using Linda Brent helped Jacobs build empathy with her readers because she understood the concern they would feel about her children being born out of wedlock. Having a pseudonym shows that Jacobs not only wanted to keep herself and her loved ones safe, but that she also wanted to show that she shared concern with her readers and wanted her them to still trust/like her after learning about her unconventional 19th century family.

An example showing how hard it was for Harriett Jacobs to get her readers to trust her and why she put so much emphasis on gaining trust through her narration is the significant amount of scholars that did not believe her novel to be true until 2008, when renowned historian, Jean Yellin, who was quoted previously, published a series of supportive documents from the mid-1800's. Even with Jacobs' opening statement, "Reader, be assured..." it took about 150 years until her autobiography was taken seriously. Karen Weierman, a professor at Worcester State University, analyzed these documents and concluded that they have "proved that *Incidents of a Slave Girl* was not fictional, as mistakenly believed by twentieth century scholars" (Weierman, 61). The primary documents supported the chronology of Jacobs' memoir and helped give her the long awaited credit and honor she deserved. It is important to understand why the acknowledgement of Jacobs' credibility is so significant in her career. The amount of obstacles that she had to overcome shows the audience how difficult it was to gain the confidence that would ultimately help her write and self-publish her story.

While creating a foundation of trust was an obstacle in itself, Jacobs also had to maintain this newly found trust with her audience while simultaneously discussing the disturbing and even shameful decisions that she made during this period of her life. Coretta Pittman, an African-American professor of English at Baylor University, claims that "black women writers have a harder time establishing and maintaining reliability because of the stigma that come with their race and gender" (Pittman, 43). Pittman studies the reasons for this false assumption that black women writers are not viewed with the same amount of respect as other writers and how important it was that Harriett Jacobs "articulated the difficulty black women writers faced ... to prove that they were respectable and credible people" (Pittman, 51). Pittman points out specifically how hard it must have been for Jacobs to retell her experiences with rape and pre-

martial sex: “two subjects women did not openly address in slave society” (Pittman, 51). While under constant pressure to succumb to her master’s desires, Jacobs engaged in a relationship with a white lawyer who lived near her grandmother and later became pregnant with his children. Because she purposefully sought out a lover that wasn’t her master, she was directly sending a message to him that she did not want to be a part of his “inner circle”. Admitting to this “sin” of premarital sex and including it in her memoir was a risky but admirable decision. By refusing to omit this personal and painful experience, the audience sees how important it is for Jacobs to share every uncomfortable detail in order to tell her story.

When she admits to these sins, Jacobs exclaims, “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous Reader!” (Jacobs, 86). Jacobs acknowledges that some of her readers may judge her for her actions and but she tries to reason with them: “You never knew what it is to be a slave!” (Jacobs, 86). This powerful statement is used to force her audience to come to terms that unless they had been a slave, they will never be able to understand why she did what she did. Jacobs also uses this opportunity to, as Pittman puts it, “re[write] an ethos of strength rather than of sexual weakness and mental inferiority” which was a common stigma of black women in the 1800’s. By including her experiences of sexual oppression, she gives her readers the opportunity to learn more about the dark realities of slavery while also deepening the moral relationship that they share. The usage of second person in this passage reaffirms the trust between Jacobs and her audience that may have been lost by admitting to “ungodly” acts.

The main effect of Harriett Jacobs’ usage of second person is forcing her readers to try to compare their life experiences to hers. Following an upsetting scene of physical violence between herself and her master, Jacobs switches into second person and asks, in a calming tone, “Reader, did you ever feel hate?” (Jacobs, 64). By doing this, she makes her audience personally

reflect on their experiences and compare them to her own. If I, as a white free woman, have felt hate, were my reasons for this hate possible to compare to a slave's hate of her master? This question calls to attention how bad life was for slaves, especially female slaves, because of the sexual abuse they encountered when their masters desired them. By addressing sexual abuse within her novel, a topic that was not discussed at all in public in the 1800's, Jacobs is building a closer relationship with her intended audience: free, mid-19th century, white women.

Identifying with the author is hard to do but it is important in the retelling of Jacobs' story. Robyn Warhol analyzes Jacobs' strategy for "enforcing identification" and emphasizes how important it was to include a relationship with the reader in an emotionally driven work of writing. She explains, "if you, a white reader, could experience what the black protagonist has experienced, you would feel what she has felt" (Warhol, 63). This statement is very true and is an idea that follows Jacobs' writing throughout her novel. The differences between herself and her readers are especially clear when Jacobs writes, after seeing her son for the first time after coming out of hiding, "O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother" (Jacobs, 261). The first sentence, "O reader, can you imagine," engages her audience and invites them once again to try to identify with her. The second sentence, "No, you cannot," forces her readers to admit their differences, because even if they are mothers, they are not slave mothers. Warhol finds this interaction with the reader interesting, stating that "Jacobs' pattern of assigning feminine attributes to the narrate points to the heart of her ... strategy" (Warhol, 65). By forming a relationship between herself and her reader to talk about the hard truths of slavery, Jacobs' purpose of writing to convince the free people to take action and abolish slavery is further supported.

While Jacobs clearly says that the experiences between a slave mother and a free mother are very different, there is a major similarity that connects all mothers and helped Jacobs maintain her ethos throughout the novel. Jacobs' love for her children was very prevalent throughout *Incidents of a Slave Girl*, helping her prove to her female, and most likely parents, that all mothers have something in common when it comes to their kids. After discussing the hard truths about being abused, having children out of wedlock, and being in hiding for seven years, the audience may not feel like they have a lot in common with Jacobs. Placing such an importance on motherhood helped connect the readers to Jacobs' struggles. She uses this opportunity of identity to plainly state that while there is a foundation of similarity for a mother's love, "unless you have been a slave mother," (Jacobs, 261) her readers will never be able to completely relate to her experiences.

Jacobs goes through many obstacles to publish her autobiography in an effort to reach out to free women all over the country in order to attempt to give them some insight about the horrors of living as a slave. In order to establish and maintain their trust and attention, Jacobs uses strong second person diction at the beginning of her story and when strong emotional events, such as becoming pregnant by an older white man, being abused by her master, and seeing her children for the first time in years provide a disturbing insight to the life of an African American slave. By using second person intermittently, Jacobs successfully grabs the readers' attention and gives them a chance to understand what it meant to be a female slave living in the 1800's.

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