

Researched Rhetorical Analysis

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Feminism and Freedom: An Analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Harriet Jacobs's memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is a recounting of her life and struggles as a slave, her escape from the institution of slavery, and her experiences in a free, yet segregated society in the northern states. One of the most popular and powerful slave narratives, it is often analyzed for Jacobs' use of rhetoric in influencing readers' interpretation of it in addition to its feminist nature and its depiction of her fight and struggle for freedom. Due to Jacobs's use of feminist rhetoric such as her intended audience, the motif of motherhood, and the expression of sexuality, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* should be considered a feminist account of her lack of and desire for freedom.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs explicitly targets a specific audience: white, middle-class women of the North for the purpose of inducing their sympathy for herself as well as the slaves and opposition to the institution of slavery. This is evident in the opening of the memoir when she states, "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South...I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is" (Jacobs 6). This rhetorical technique contains an underlying feminist tone because of Jacobs, being a woman herself, purposely seeking the comfort and aid of other women. It is worth noting that Jacobs may have targeted this specific audience because of her belief that this particular group of people would understand her position as a female and would therefore be less judgmental of her decisions. Also, she may have targeted this specific audience because of her belief that they could actually make a difference with the abolishment of the institution of slavery. This is evident through the words "I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens" (6). The abler pens are those of the white women of the North: her targeted audience.

Furthermore, Jacobs' use of rhetoric through her intended audience is evident through the transitions between first and second person point of view. For the majority of the work, Jacobs writes from first person point of view. However, near the end of some chapters, she switches to second person point of view, speaking directly to her intended audience. For example, near the end of the chapter titled "The Trials of Girlhood," Jacobs directly addresses the audience when she says "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion...for my sisters who are still in bondage" (Jacobs 47). Because Jacobs directly addresses her audience when she often says "Reader," an effect is created such that readers feel the emotional connection that Jacobs intends to create between them in order to further gain their empathy and establish her reliability as an author.

Jacobs' use of deliberately seeking her intended audience also ties into another rhetorical strategy that she utilizes: motherhood. In her article "Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," the University of Rochester's Stephanie Li argues, "Aware of the rhetorical power and political potential of motherhood, Jacobs deliberately fashions her text to appeal to the sensibilities of a largely white, female, middle-class audience" (Li 17). This implies that along with Jacobs intentionally choosing and directing her writing towards a specific population of people, motherhood is another feminist rhetorical strategy that Jacobs applies to her writing for the purpose of creating anti-slavery sentiments.

Jacobs' motif of motherhood in this memoir is used as a means of resistance as well as "a crucial form of female empowerment" (Li 15). This is evident in the narrative when Dr. Flint demands her to move into the cottage that he has built for her. She responds by saying, "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother" (Jacobs 87). According to Li, "her announcement to Dr. Flint of her pregnancy leaves her with a sense of "triumph" because it signals a degree of independence from his domination" (17). Jacobs's refusal to obey Dr. Flint's command is the first instance in the narrative when she openly and explicitly does not follow his demands. Her condition as a soon-to-be mother is what gives her the strength to resist his advances, thus seeking freedom from his control over her.

Moreover, the motif of motherhood is utilized as a means of resistance after Jacobs has run away from Dr. Flint's plantation and while she is in hiding in her grandmother's shed, resisting her oppressors for an extensive period of time. One may question why and how Jacobs could survive in that "dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move [her] limbs, for nearly seven years" (Jacobs 224). In addition to the physical agony, Jacobs endured emotional pain because of being so close yet so far away from her children as she states, "I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow" (173-174). Seeing her kids every day without being able to hold them in her arms seems like it should have made her give up and reveal herself from hiding. As Li notes, however, it was her "commitment to her children" that gave her the physical and mental strength and resiliency to cope with such poor living conditions in addition to "secur[ing] their freedom" (17). Jacobs's description of her enduring such a torturous environment for so long is important and highly effective because it exemplifies the strength that the concept of motherhood has in depicting her extreme desire to be a free woman, with depicting just how horrible slavery must have been for her to prefer living in the attic of the shed, and with showing how strong she is mentally.

Furthermore, the motherhood motif is portrayed as a means of resistance in the narrative after Jacobs reaches the free states. While working as a nurse for Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs, well aware of the fugitive slave law, makes the decision to run away again. However, it is, as Li argues, Mrs. Bruce's motherhood that is used as a "tool of resistance against those who perpetuate and enforce slavery" because she tells Jacobs to take her [Mrs. Bruce's] baby with her (26). When Jacobs reflects on this moment, she states

but how few mothers would have consented to have one of their own babes become a fugitive, for the sake of a poor, hunted nurse, on whom the legislators of the country had let loose the bloodhounds! When I spoke of the sacrifice she was making, in depriving herself of her dear baby, she replied, 'It is better for you to have baby with you, Linda; for if they get on your track, they will be obliged to bring the child to me; and then, if there is a possibility of saving you, you shall be saved.'

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The word "fugitive" and the phrase "hunted" are important because they depict the severity of Jacobs's situation while also implicating the use of pathos through her depicting herself as less than human. This contributes to her goal of persuading her audience, white women of the north, to empathize with her and support the abolition of slavery through the depiction of herself enduring harassment outside of the South and through the depiction of another northern white woman doing just what she wants: showing empathy towards her and contempt towards slavery. By depicting Mrs. Bruce as being willing to make such a large sacrifice for the sake of a run-away slave, Jacobs could have deliberately attempted to convey the notion to her readers that they could also support the emancipation of slavery and support freedom of all, ultimately communicating the idea that if Mrs. Bruce can do something that drastic, the least her audience can do is oppose slavery and try to get other people of the North to do the same.

Jacobs's representation of sexuality in this memoir appeals to the feministic aspect of her lack of freedom past slavery. This is relevant in the context of her being taken advantage of by Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint's dominance over Jacobs reflects her subordination and lack of freedom beyond the institution of slavery itself. What would be referred to today as human rights and personal liberties were non-existent in her life as a slave. She was terrorized and taken advantage of and had no way to seek justice by means of implementing the law; she had to accept the abuse while maintaining a passive nature. At this point in her recalling of her experiences, she has the sympathy of her audience. After describing the abuse that she underwent, the white women of the North may have had feelings of compassion towards Jacobs because of their inability to imagine going through the same things she and all other female slave have gone through. However, once Jacobs speaks about her entering into a relationship with Mr. Sands in order to avoid Dr. Flint's sexual advances, essentially turning to a lesser evil in order to escape the primary evil, that sympathy may have been diminished and Jacobs may have been viewed as morally disgraceful. This is due to the very conservative nature of the society in which her readers lived and the religion-influenced beliefs that they may have held. It is worth noting that, according to Margaret Washington in her article "From Motives of Delicacy: Sexuality and Morality in the Narratives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs," "promiscuousness defined black women—any black woman, but particularly enslaved ones. The literate, presentable, self-emancipated Harriet Jacobs remained under the cloak of promiscuity." Also, as Washington mentions, "submitting to white men's sexual advances, no matter what the circumstances, implied promiscuousness and reinforced the stereotype of black women as lascivious" (66). This implies that all black female slaves, including Jacobs, were valued and viewed as less than the rest of society, even though they already had the tendency to be valued less because of the fact that they were slaves. Therefore, female slaves were at the very top of the undesirable and intolerable list. Jacobs combats such views by constantly pleading for sympathy, attempting to justify her actions, and explicitly stating that she recognizes that the things she has done are wrong. This is evident when she says "pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader," "you never knew what it is to be a slave," and "I know I did wrong" (86). Furthermore, she "implicitly endorses the shared value of sexual purity as the grounds for communication with her genteel audience" as Franny Nudelman states in her article titled "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering" (939). Doing so might reestablish the sympathy that readers may have lost for her and the rest of the female slaves over the course of the narrative. Though Jacobs reaches the free states and holds her certificate of purchase in her hand, she is still enslaved, in a feminist sense, because of the ridicule and criticism that she believes she will receive by her audience due to her immoral sexual behavior.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* should be deemed a feminist memoir concerning Jacobs' lack of and fight for freedom because she employs several feminist rhetorical techniques such as appealing to a northern, white, and female audience with the purpose of evoking sympathy and anti-slavery sentiments; utilizing the motif of motherhood, in terms of herself as well as other women, as a means of resistance; and depicting sexuality through which she appeals to the feminist aspect of her bondage. These feminist rhetorical techniques cohesively contribute to Jacobs's effectiveness of writing.

Works Cited

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