



Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs

Distortion of the Familial Bonds

“No pen can give adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” (Jacobs 51). This quote from Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* functions as reference to both the author’s personal struggles under slavery and as an important theme throughout her narrative. In her personal story, Jacobs reveals that the institution of slavery crippled the traditional family structure. Slave women like Harriet needed permission from their masters to marry, which often delayed or destroyed their ability to wed. Sexual abuse and exploitation from the slaveholder was all too common. The family unit was further threatened by the dispersal of its members, when the children of slave women could be sold soon after their birth. These attempts by slaveholders to weaken the slave family unit were intentional. A slave holder who raped his slaves counted the children as added wealth, while the separation of children from mothers further simplified their sale. While all of these disturbing themes are explored by the main character, Linda, Harriet Jacobs also personalizes the impact of slavery on the family by describing her complex relationship with her grandmother. Slavery greatly distorts Linda’s relationship with her grandmother, pitting Linda’s subversive fight for freedom against her grandmother’s guidance and well-being.

Throughout Linda’s life her grandmother embodies the roles of mother and father figure by providing both emotional and economic reinforcement. As a free woman, Linda’s grandmother possesses the ability to provide a refuge and stream of support which makes Linda “indebted to her for many more important services” than simple creature comforts (Jacobs 6). Her home and income allow her to feed, clothe, and conceal her granddaughter during times of need. Following the death of her father, Linda’s grandmother also becomes a confidant, one of the few people she can trust with her hopes and dreams. However, their relationship is quite complex. “Although my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her. I had been accustomed to look up to her with a respect bordering upon awe” (Jacobs 28-29). This fear and respect keeps Linda from sharing her struggle against Dr. Flint’s advances with her grandmother and leads to their first major conflict.

As a young slave girl of fifteen years, Linda is forced to choose between the virtues instilled by her much respected Grandmother and her need to assert herself sexually to avoid further enslavement. While Linda succeeds in avoiding many of Dr. Flint’s advances, she is given a final ultimatum when he promises to build a cottage for her. Instead of allowing Dr. Flint to “succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet” (Jacobs 53), Linda rebels and gives herself to Mr. Sands. This action violates the innocence and virtue instilled by her family and Linda must struggle with “the sorrow I was bringing on my grandmother.” (Jacobs 56).



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Yet this sorrow is not stronger than Linda's desire to triumph over her master. When Linda finally enjoys her moment of victory, it is shadowed by the knowledge that her family will learn of her hidden affair and lost innocence (Jacobs 56). Following her confession, Linda's grandmother reveals that she would rather see her granddaughter dead than in her current state, pregnant and unwed (Jacobs 56). This harsh opinion must be tempered by the historical context. Under the law of slavery, a slave woman's children must follow their mother into servitude. Furthermore, both slaves and whites placed great importance upon the institution of marriage. Therefore, when Linda implores her grandmother for forgiveness and relates her struggles with Dr. Flint, she must settle for the old woman's pity (Jacobs 57). For Linda, her subversive triumph comes at a hefty price – her grandmother's respect.

This pity for the fallen granddaughter contrasts the forgiveness the grandmother bestows upon her son, further harming the women's bond. When Benjamin becomes a fugitive slave, "he asked her pardoning for the suffering he had caused her. She said she had nothing to forgive; she could not blame his desire for freedom" (Jacobs 22). Like Benjamin, Linda desires personal freedom over enslavement. However, she commits an unforgivable sin by defying her grandmother's teachings, corrupting their relationship with an unpardonable action. Linda tries to defend herself to her audience, stating that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 56). Here she is articulating not only her frustration with the standards placed by society, but the standards to which her grandmother held her. These standards reveal the double hardship endured by the slave woman, to retain her dignity as well as her personal freedom in the face slavery. The high value placed upon her purity, by both men like Dr. Flint, and women like her grandmother, illustrates both the fetters placed by slavery and gender bias. The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter suffers further strain because Linda continues her unforgivable relationship with Mr. Sands, resulting in the birth of two children.

The struggle between Linda and her grandmother eventually grows to encompass Linda's two children, Ben and Ellen. Linda briefly contemplates infanticide following Ellen's birth. "As I held her in my arms, I thought how well it would be for her if she never waked up" (Jacobs 87). For Linda, the prospect of committing her own daughter to a life of brutal slavery and sexual indignity is almost too much to bear.



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However, she does not commit murder, but throws herself completely into procuring freedom for her son and daughter, even if at the expense of herself. Linda reveals that “I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery” (Jacobs 89). To procure freedom for herself and her children, Linda rebelliously plans to hide until Dr. Flint becomes discouraged and then sells the three of them. Should a white man like Mr. Sands purchase Linda and her own children, he would have the power to set them free. However, Linda’s grandmother uses a mother’s guilt to delay her escape.

“Ah, my child,” said she, “don’t trust too much to [Mr. Sands]. Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment. If you go, you will make me miserable the short time I have to live . . . Do give it up, Linda.” (Jacobs 91)

The grandmother’s frantic plea places Linda in a tough dilemma. By risking an escape, she may be able to ensure the safety of herself and her children, but the ordeal would greatly harm her grandmother. In her argument, Linda’s grandmother also hints at the untrustworthiness of men, encouraging Linda not to put faith in Mr. Sands and risk losing her children. Linda’s decision to delay her escape reflects her loyalty to her grandmother and her fear of forsaking her children.

Linda’s grandmother continues to play off of Linda’s fear of being a bad mother, causing further conflict in their relationship. “And she would hug them to her own bosom, as if to reproach me for my want of affection; but she knew all the while that I loved them better than my life” (Jacobs 92). Linda’s children have become an emotional fetter that ties Linda to her grandmother’s home, a fact that does not escape the aged woman. Not until the safety of her children is threatened does Linda attempt to break the bond.



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When the Flint family prepares to send Ellen and Ben from their grandmother's home to live with Linda on the plantation, she must choose between their safety and the desires of her grandmother. Like many slaves, Linda understands that the life of a plantation or field slave is much more arduous and violent than the life of an urban slave. Plantation slaves often suffered greater indignities and torture due to their lack of public visibility, and Linda suspects that on the plantation, her children will be "broke in" (Jacobs 94). Therefore, their presence on the plantation will further tie Linda's family into the cruel bonds of slavery, a fact which forces her to flee. "I remembered the grief this step would bring upon my dear old grandmother; and nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice" (Jacobs 95). Now the nature of the conflict has changed, with Linda placing the safety of her children above the happiness of her grandmother. She chooses to assert her growing maturity and role as a mother over the wishes of her grandmother and only parental figure.

However, Linda's escape sacrifices more than her grandmother's happiness. By defiantly remaining hidden above her grandmother's shed, Linda relinquishes her right to motherhood. "Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, 'Your mother is here'" (Jacobs 148). For slave children to be raised by a family member other than their parent was not uncommon, but Linda's voyeuristic position within the shed raises another dilemma. By harboring Linda within her home, her grandmother is violation of the Fugitive Slave Law. Passed in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law made it a punishable offense to aid fugitive slaves. Therefore, Linda is deeply indebted to her grandmother for concealing her and caring for her children. She is also conflicted over her inability to help the aged woman. "How hard it seemed, that I could not tend upon her, who had so long and tenderly watched over me" (Jacobs 123). During her seven years of confinement, Linda must struggle against the urge to care for her grandmother and children and her desire to remain free of Dr. Flint. At any point she could return to the Flints and alleviate the burden upon her family, but instead she chooses cramped concealment, stating "I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (Jacobs 114). While Linda has subversively cut her bonds to the Flints, the institution of slavery continues to confine her.

When Linda does attempt to escape the cramped space above her Grandmother's shed, she faces more conflict. Her Grandmother has already expressed her fear that she "shouldn't have any of my children or grandchildren left to hand me a drink when I'm dying, and lay my old body in the ground" (Jacobs 143). Yet, when the opportunity to escape to the north arises, Linda feels compelled to take the risk. Her grandmother's cries of "O, don't think of it, child. You'll break my heart," nearly compel Linda to stay (Jacobs 149).



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For Linda, the dilemma of choosing between her personal freedom and her Grandmother's peace of mind resolves itself following the breach of her safe heaven. Only when her grandmother assumes that Jenny saw Linda in the storeroom is she willing to part with her beloved granddaughter (Jacobs 153). This separation of the two women proves to be final and further illustrates the cruel ultimatums forced upon slaves.

Throughout *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda's grandmother remains a friend and caregiver, yet their relationship is severely warped by the institution of slavery. Linda is repeatedly forced to choose between freedom and her grandmother's wishes and well being. She sacrifices her innocence, physical freedom, right to motherhood, and responsibilities as a granddaughter in her battle to be free. Perhaps the greatest sacrifice occurs following Linda's emancipation when her grandmother does not live long enough to see her granddaughter a free woman.

Works Cited

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987.

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