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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

by Harriet Jacobs

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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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 1st
 - 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.

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?

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

III. The Slaves' New Year's Day.

VOCABULARY

extorted – obtained by threat
haggard – worn, exhausted

1. What is the significance of January 1st to a slave?

2. For what reasons is the first of January particularly difficult for slave women?

XIV. Another Link to Life.

VOCABULARY

avarice – greed
descanting – discussing at length
epithet – a term of abuse
genealogies – histories of ancestry; family trees
lacerated – cut, slashed
palsy – to paralyze
reprobate – an immoral, good-for-nothing person
skeins – complex tangles (usually of yarn or string)
surname – last name
vituperations – verbal attacks

1. List two examples of Dr. Flint's physical abuse of Linda that illustrate that she has reason to be afraid of him.

2. How does Linda feel when she gives birth to a baby girl?

3. Jacobs' writing is enhanced by interesting images and sometimes symbolism. What does the gold chain in the following passage represent in this story?

“When we left the church, my father's old mistress invited me to go home with her. She clasped a gold chain round my baby's neck. I thanked her for this kindness; but I did not like the emblem. I wanted no chain to be fastened on my daughter, not even if its links were of gold. How earnestly I prayed that she might never feel the weight of slavery's chain, whose iron entereth into the soul!”

XXV. Competition in Cunning.

VOCABULARY

purport – significance, importance, meaning

- 1. Why does Linda write letters to Dr. Flint and pretend that the letters are being sent from her new home in the North?

- 2. Describe Linda’s physical condition after living in the small hiding place for five years.

- 3. To what extent do you believe Linda’s story about living in the cramped room for five years without fresh air, sunlight, or the ability to exercise?
