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Incidents in the Life
of a Slave Girl
Harriet Jacobs

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*Incidents in the Life
of a Slave Girl*

Harriet Jacobs



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

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.

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.

Chapters VII – XI

12. Linda wonders why slaves bothered to fall in love. She had fallen in love with a free black man, a carpenter. Dr. Flint became angry and jealous, and he forbade her to marry him. Linda maintained that being in love was one small thing that lifted her spirits during slavery, so the idea was difficult to abandon. She explained to Dr. Flint that she had the right to love whom she wanted. At which point, he struck her for the first time. Linda wanted to remain with her lover, but knowing how difficult their relationship would be, and the possibility that her children would be slaves under such circumstances, she eventually encouraged him to move to the Free States.

Early in Chapter VII, Linda quotes lines from a poem, “The Lament of Tasso,” by Lord Byron, that describes the pain of unrequited love. Write a poem about the difficulty of not being able to be with the person you love. Express your thoughts and feelings in a poem of at least six lines. Your poem can be in any form and does not need to rhyme. If you need ideas or inspiration for your poem, consider Linda’s situation.

13. Turning attention away from her personal story, Linda comments on issues of slavery. She begins by stating that one way slave owners kept their slaves from running away to the North was by spreading rumors about how terrible people of color were treated in the Free States. Linda uses an example of a slave owner who told a story about a friend of Linda’s who had escaped to New York. The owner said this woman begged to be returned to the South, as she was miserable and starving. Linda later found out this report was a complete fabrication; the truth was that Linda’s friend was living happily and comfortably.

Slave owners used word of mouth or letters to spread their messages. Imagine that the scene described above had been explained using a 21st-century method of communication—Twitter. Write two twitter messages, one from the slave owner, and one from Linda’s friend that summarizes each person’s version of the story. Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters, so you must convey your messages as concisely as possible.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

18. As Linda feared, her grandmother was irate when she found out about the pregnancy. Much of her grandmother's anger stemmed from a misunderstanding about who the father was. Linda's grandmother believed that Linda had given in to Dr. Flint's advances and that he was the one who impregnated her. Linda was kicked out of her grandmother's house. She went to live with a friend, who comforted her, telling her to go back home and explain the truth. Linda heeded this advice. Her grandmother, while not happy about Linda's condition, showed her compassion and let her stay.

Linda was confronted with a difficult situation: how to approach her grandmother about her pregnancy and how to regain her grandmother's trust and respect. If advice columnists existed at that time, Linda might have written a letter asking for advice. As Linda, write to an advice columnist about how to handle the situation. Then, write the advice columnist's response to Linda.

19. In Chapter XI, Dr. Flint came to visit Linda at her grandmother's house. He wanted to know who the father of the baby was. Linda refused to tell him. He claimed he came to forgive her for her immoral behavior, but now he could not. Dr. Flint promised to take care of her and the baby as long as Linda refused to see the father again. She told him she could not make that promise and did not want his support. Linda's pregnancy was difficult, and the baby was born premature. She needed medical attention but refused to have Dr. Flint tend to her. Over time, Linda and the baby boy recovered their strength.

Dr. Flint is shown to be a complex man. He is domineering, controlling, influential, jealous, and has moments of patience, but he is quick to anger. The reader sees his personality entirely through Linda's eyes. Rewrite the section early in Chapter XI, from when Dr. Flint arrives to visit Linda until he departs in anger, as if it is being told from Dr. Flint's point of view.