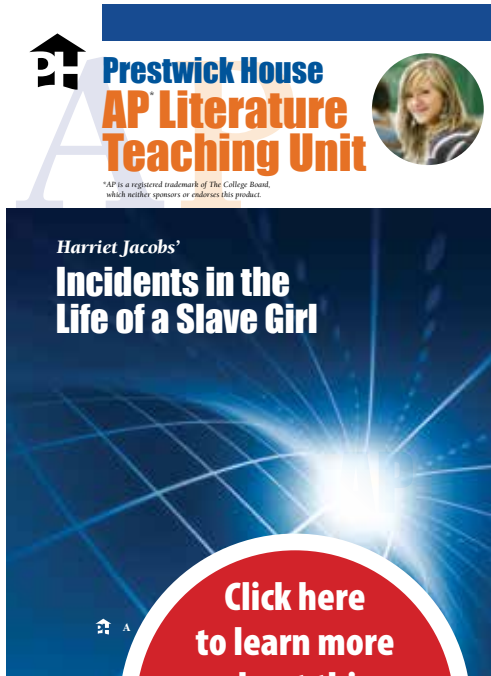




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Teaching Unit

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

by Harriet Jacobs

written by Frank Hering



Prestwick House

Item No. 308629

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. explain the function of an autobiographical narrator.
2. discuss the novel in relation to historical and literary-historical contexts.
3. identify rhetorical strategies and explain how they are used to persuade an intended audience.
4. examine the issue of gender roles in the development of characters and their relationships.
5. identify, examine, and discuss the use of imagery and figurative language (simile, metaphor, and symbolism).
6. analyze the author's use of tone, diction, voice, and perspective in the narration and in the dialogue.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORY OF THE TEXT

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* appeared in 1861, after the Civil War had already begun. Since abolitionists assumed that the only use of a slave narrative was to arouse sympathy among whites, the book was seen as being published too late to have any social or political impact. Therefore, it received little public acclaim until it was rediscovered more than 100 years later, in the 1970s, as a result of the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and feminist scholarship in the universities.

Jacobs had tried to have her narrative published earlier. With her brother, Jacobs had already run an anti-slavery reading room in Rochester, New York, in the same building that housed the offices of Frederick Douglass's newspaper *The North Star*. There, she met and became friends with the important abolitionist Amy Post, who urged Jacobs to publish her story. Reluctant to reveal her painful private life to the public, Jacobs nevertheless began compiling her narrative in 1853, completing it in 1858. Jacobs had already tried to gain support for the publication of her manuscript from Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had become famous with her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead of agreeing to support the publication of the slave narrative, Stowe agreed only to include Jacobs's story in her upcoming book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Determined to tell her own story, Jacobs went to England with letters from her abolitionist friends, but returned home unsuccessful. She then found a Boston publisher, but he went bankrupt.

Another Boston publisher agreed to publish the book if it included a preface by Lydia Maria Child, a famous abolitionist, women's rights activist, opponent of American expansionism, Indian rights activist, novelist, and journalist. Perhaps best known for her authorship of "Over the River and Through the Woods," Child was a conspicuous anti-slavery activist, particularly in her 1833 book *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, which argued for the immediate emancipation of all slaves without compensation to slaveholders. She also explored the complex issues of slavery in fiction, such as "The Quadroons" (1842) and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843). Despite being a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society's executive committee and the editor of its newspaper, *The Standard*, Child left the Society because of the abolitionists' inability to work together as a cohesive unit and their constant arguing over the role of women in the Society. Child continued to write for many newspapers and periodicals promoting anti-slavery goals and equality for women. Child agreed to write the preface and to act as Jacobs's editor.

When this second publisher went bankrupt, Jacobs decided to purchase the plates of her book and publish it herself. It was finally published in 1861 by a third Boston printer, and in 1862, the English edition, *The Deeper Wrong*, was published in London. While her book may have been too late to incite the Civil War, Jacobs's was the first book-length narrative by an ex-slave that revealed the unique brutalities faced by enslaved women. While male narratives highlight their own daring escapes and heroic actions, Jacobs's narrative focuses on the "incidents" in her family life and addresses such social and political issues as the role of the church in slavery, the slaves' New Year's Day, what slaves were taught to think of the North, the impact of the Fugitive Slave Law on runaways, and the repercussions faced by slaves after Nat Turner's failed insurrection.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 1 – 6

Carefully read the following selection from Chapter II of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Then, choose the best answer to each of the following multiple-choice questions.

Dr. Flint, a physician in the neighborhood, had married the sister of my mistress, and I was now the property of their little daughter. It was not without murmuring that I prepared for my new home; and what added to my unhappiness, was the fact that my brother William was purchased by the same family. My father, by his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skillful mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he daily detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first."

"You are *my* child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water."

Poor Willie! He was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master. Grandmother tried to cheer us with hopeful words, and they found an echo in the credulous hearts of youth.

When we entered our new home we encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment. We were glad when the night came. On my narrow bed I moaned and wept, I felt so desolate and alone.

I had been there nearly a year, when a dear little friend of mine was buried. I heard her mother sob, as the clods fell on the coffin of her only child, and I turned away from the grave, feeling thankful that I still had something left to love. I met my grandmother, who said, "Come with me, Linda;" and from her tone I knew that something sad had happened. She led me apart from the people, and then said, "My child, your father is dead." Dead! How could I believe it? He had died so suddenly I had not even heard that he was sick. I went home with my grandmother. My heart rebelled against God, who had taken from me mother, father, mistress, and friend. The good grandmother tried to comfort me. "Who knows the ways of God?" said she. "Perhaps they have been kindly taken from the evil days to come." Years afterwards I often thought of this. She promised to be a mother to her grandchildren, so far as she might be permitted to do so; and strengthened by her love, I returned to my master's. I thought I should be allowed to go to my father's house the next morning; but I was ordered to go for flowers, that my mistress's house might be decorated for an evening party. I spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons, while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me. What cared my owners for that? He was merely a piece of property. Moreover, they thought he had spoiled his children, by teaching them to feel that they were human beings. This was blasphemous doctrine for a slave to teach; presumptuous in him, and dangerous to the masters.

The next day I followed his remains to a humble grave beside that of my dear mother. There were those who knew my father's worth, and respected his memory.

My home now seemed more dreary than ever. The laugh of the little slave-children sounded harsh and cruel. It was selfish to feel so about the joy of others. My brother moved about with a very grave face. I tried to comfort him, by saying, "Take courage, Willie; brighter days will come by and by."

"You don't know any thing about it, Linda," he replied. "We shall have to stay here all our days; we shall never be free."

I argued that we were growing older and stronger, and that perhaps we might, before long, be allowed to hire our own time, and then we could earn money to buy our freedom. William declared this was much easier to say than to do; moreover, he did not intend to *buy* his freedom. We held daily controversies upon this subject.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Prefatory Material

1. How do the two epigraphs prepare readers for Harriet Jacobs's stated purpose in writing the narrative?

2. In the last paragraph of her Preface, why does Jacobs say she wants "to arouse" her readers to a "realizing sense" of the conditions of slavery, rather than say she wants "to inform" her readers so they will have "knowledge" of the conditions of slavery?

3. Compare the "Introduction by the Editor" to the "Preface by the Author." How do Lydia Maria Child's reasons for editing this slave narrative differ from Jacobs's reasons for writing it? Why do they differ?

4. What does Child mean when she says in her Introduction "some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction"? Why does she make this statement?

8. When Benjamin is taken away by a slave trader, who is forbidden to sell him until he is out of the state, Linda's grandmother has a friend in New Orleans who offers to buy him on her behalf. Jacobs then writes, "When he saw Benjamin, and stated his business, he thanked him; but said he preferred to wait a while before making the trader an offer. He knew he had tried to obtain a high price for him, and had invariably failed. This encouraged him to make another effort for freedom." The ambiguous pronouns in this sentence make it hard to understand. What is happening in this interaction?

9. According to Jacobs, Benjamin's second attempt at escaping from slavery is successful in part because he can pass for white. How does this ability influence his announcing to Phil, "I part with all my kindred"?

10. About Uncle Benjamin and his escape, Jacobs writes, "And so it proved. We never heard from him again." How does Jacobs communicate how Uncle Benjamin's example may affect her and her own thoughts of escaping from slavery?

11. Why does the chapter end with Linda's grandmother buying Phillip's freedom and with the two of them and Linda saying "He that is willing to be a slave, let him be a slave"?

Chapter X

1. Analyze the effect created by the anaphora in the following quotation: “I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death.”

2. What is the effect of the adjective clause in the sentence, “I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet”?

3. How does the following sentence add to the characterization of Linda Brent: “I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him”?

4. Analyze the effect of the imagery used in this sentence: “I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss.”

5. Instead of gaining her intended readers’ sympathies by saying she was forced into sex or by claiming that her lover took advantage of her innocence or plight, Jacobs confesses, “I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness.” What effect does such an admission have on characterization and on the reliability of the narrative?

Chapters XXXI – XXXIII

1. How does the following passage contribute to the reader’s understanding of how Linda views herself?

He was approaching a subject on which I was extremely sensitive ... I frankly told him some of the most important events of my life. It was painful for me to do it; but I would not deceive him. If he was desirous of being my friend, I thought he ought to know how far I was worthy of it.

2. In Chapter XXXI, how does Linda’s reaction to the word “contempt” contribute to the reader’s understanding of how she views herself?

3. Jacobs writes, in Chapter XXXI: “That night I sought my pillow with feelings I had never carried to it before. I verily believed myself to be a free woman.” Then, the fire-bells ring. How might her reaction to the fire-bells foreshadow her future feelings about herself as a free woman?
