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Teaching Harriet Jacobs's

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

from

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by

Frank Hering



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General Introduction to the Work

Slave Narratives

INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL, Written by Herself is a slave narrative. Between 1820 and 1860, ex-slaves produced many written accounts of slavery. They told of their experiences in bondage, their heroic journeys to freedom, and their subsequent dedication to the abolitionist movement. They explored the psychology and social relationships of masters and slaves and demanded the emancipation of all the enslaved. Many of these works sold by the thousands.

While documenting the cruelties of slavery, these narratives also gave proof that African-Americans possessed the higher intellectual powers of all human beings. Their authors were both readers and writers, and their autobiographical narratives were intended not only to serve abolitionist goals, but also to present literary art for posterity. As these writers explored how one can most effectively narrate one's own experiences, they turned to such popular nineteenth-century modes of writing as sentimental romances, plantation novels, biographies of great men, lectures on self-improvement, frontier travel accounts, Sunday-school morality tales, Puritan confessions, and Methodist conversion narratives.

Slave narratives also employed one of America's oldest literary traditions: the jeremiad. Named for the Book of Jeremiah, the American jeremiad was a type of political sermon. It both condemned Americans for betraying the nation's sacred covenant as history's (or God's) chosen nation and optimistically asserted the realization of an American utopia if only its citizens would recommit themselves to its founding principles. The paradigmatic American Jeremiad is John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" (1630), a sermon that sought to unify the Puritans aboard the *Arbella* by creating tension between their ideal of social life and its flawed manifestation. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a jeremiad, as is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. President Barack Obama's inaugural address was a jeremiad, as are many political speeches. Unlike its European cousin, the American jeremiad holds out the hope for social change and public progress.¹

Mid-nineteenth-century readers were very familiar with anti-slavery jeremiads that reminded them of America's betrayal of its divinely appointed mission. In her slave narrative, Harriet Jacobs focuses most of her criticism of America's betrayal of its principles on the Fugitive Slave Law: "The judges of Massachusetts had not then stooped under chains to enter her courts of justice, so called. I knew my old master was rather skittish of Massachusetts. I relied on her love of freedom, and felt safe on her soil. I am now aware that I honored the old Commonwealth beyond her deserts." Despite her just condemnations, Jacobs remains hopeful that things can change: "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, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations."

¹ See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.)

Feminist Theory Applied to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One ⁵

Examining Slave Narrative Quest Patterns

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Feminist Activity One: Handout One and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Feminism Activity One: Handout Two.

Note: You may wish to hand out extra copies of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Feminism Activity One: Handout Two so that students can take notes on each group's presentation in step 6.

2. Have students (either in class or as homework) re-read Chapter IV: "The Slave Who Dared to Feel like a Man," asking them to pay special attention to how each character envisions his or her own escape from enslavement. Instruct students to complete *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Feminist Activity One: Handout One as they read the chapter.
3. Have students discuss their findings as a class. Direct this discussion so that students present and examine the textual evidence they have found.
4. Divide the class into groups of approximately five students each. Try to have males and females in each group.
5. Instruct students to complete *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Feminism Activity One: Handout Two.
6. After allowing students sufficient time to complete the handout, reconvene the class and have each group present to the rest of the class its responses to one or two questions. Allow the other groups to comment on the presenting group's responses.

⁵ The three activities in the Feminist section are indebted to Stephanie A. Smith's chapter on Harriet Jacobs in her *Conceived by Liberty: Maternal Figures and 19th-Century American Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 134 – 159.

Marxist Approach Applied to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies

Activity One

Examining Class Conflict in the Responses to Nat Turner's Revolt

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Marxist Activity One: Handout One.

Note: You may wish to give each student an extra copy of the handout to allow them more space to record the full class's discussion in step 6.

2. Have students re-read Chapter XII: "Fear of Insurrection."
3. Instruct students to complete the handout: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Marxist Activity One.
4. Divide the class into groups of approximately five students each.
5. In their small groups, have students discuss their responses to each of the questions. Instruct students to modify the responses on their sheets based on the conversation.
6. Reconvene the class and have each group present its response to one or two of the questions and then allow the other students to respond to the presenting group. Again, have students modify the responses on their sheets to reflect the full class's presentations and discussion.

New Historicism Applied to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Arab-Israeli story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



Activity One

Determining Harriet Jacobs's Intended Audience

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: New Historicist Activity One: Handout One.

Note: You may wish to give each student an extra copy of the handout to allow them more space to record the full class's discussion in step 5.

2. Divide the class into groups of approximately five students each. Try to have both males and females in each group.
3. Assign each group to one of the five selections listed below.
 - Epigraphs, Preface by the Author, and Introduction by the Editor
 - Chapter III, from “O, you happy women . . .” to “. . . is capable of feeling a mother's agonies”; Chapter XI, from “I immediately informed Mrs. Bruce . . .” to the end of the chapter.
 - Chapter V
 - Chapter IX
 - Chapter X
4. Instruct students to re-read their assigned portion of the text and, as a group, answer the questions on their handouts. Have each student record the group's responses on his or her own handout.
5. Reconvene the class, and have each group present its responses, allowing other students to comment on the presenting group's ideas. You may want to have students take notes on each group's presentation, either on their own paper or on additional copies of Handout One.
6. As the discussion draws to a close, have the students combine what they learned in the presentations in order to create an overall picture of Jacobs's intended audience.