

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 3: Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897)

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Primary Work

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Told By Herself (using the name Linda Brent), ed. Lydia Maria Child, 1861; republished as *The Deeper Wrong. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1862.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. 1986.

Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. NY: New York UP, 1996.

Johnson, Yvonne. *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*. NY: Peter Lang, 1998.

Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

Yellin, Jean F. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. NY: Basic Civitas, 2004.

Study Questions

1. Compare and contrast Linda Brent with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. See especially the following quotation from *Incidents* that equates unwed motherhood with stigma: "My unconscious babe was the ever-present witness of my shame."
2. Write a paper comparing Jacobs and Douglass and based on the following central quotations from each narrative: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Jacobs) and "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass).
3. Explore the particular obstacles Linda Brent faces and their significance for women at the end of the twentieth century: sexual harassment, poor mothers' legal rights, and difficulties for advancement when faced with responsibilities and care for children.
4. Jacobs ends her narrative "with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage." Comment on the implication here that freedom matters more to Linda Brent than marriage. To what extent does *Incidents* suggest that the "life story" is different for enslaved women than for free (white) women?
5. Identify the contradictions implied in Dr. Flint's promise to Linda that if she moves into the house he has built for her, he will "make her a lady."
6. Find a troubling passage. What is troubling? Why? What does this suggest? Why do you think that *Incidents* was believed the production of a white woman, not of a former slave? Why do you think that *Incidents* was thought to be a novel, not an autobiography?

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