

Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Chapter 10; *A Perilous Passage in Slave Girl's Life*.

Introduction

The critical analysis on Chapter Ten of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, will examine the insights to the history of slavery and abolition, as well as the importance of the gender of the author in question.

Insights into the History of Slavery and Abolition

Chapter Ten continues describing Harriet Jacobs' experience as a slave, expanding on her relationship with her Master and how she feels towards her Master building and gifting her with a small home of her own. Jacobs explains that "The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world".¹ Her life as a slave had taught her to constantly watch others, distrusting them, and understanding things at a much earlier age in order to survive.

Harriet continues to express her longing for love and freedom, "If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery."² Jacobs' wish for a family, a husband and a safe home shows us that she, like anyone else at the time, wanted to live the American Dream. However, slavery has restricted her and stopped Harriet from achieving her dreams that she could have accomplished if slavery was abolished. This demonstrates that Jacobs had a motivation, desire, and purpose to be free.

Jacobs describes how a man named Mr. Sands, who had taken interest in her "who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment".³ She expresses a yearning to be brought by him in order to be freed from her Master, and to be loved. "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment".⁴ However, she reminds herself throughout that she "was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old".⁵ Harriet also expresses her disgust and dismay at the idea of her falling pregnant with her Master's child, and it too living its life as a slave, "I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant."⁶ This idea upsets her due to the fact if she was to have a child, it would be taken

¹Jacobs, Harriet [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Chapter 10; *A Perilous Passage in Slave Girl's Life*, pg. 51

² Jacobs, Harriet [Linda Brent], pg. 51

³ Jacobs, Harriet [Linda Brent], pg. 52

⁴ Jacobs, Harriet, pg. 52

⁵ Jacobs, Harriet, pg. 52

⁶ Jacobs, Harriet, pg. 53

away, explaining, "he never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife"⁷, thus she would have no connection or relationship with her kin.

Importance of the Gender of the Author

The chapter is concluded on the discovery that Harriet is pregnant with her master's baby, and she tells him as an excuse to not move into the home he built for her, "In a few months I shall be a mother."⁸ Harriet Jacobs as a woman tells us, the readers, that she feels ashamed to be pregnant and that gossip will ensue amongst the slaves. She also seems to take responsibility for becoming pregnant, at only fifteen years old, and that she as the woman is to blame. This demonstrates the way female slaves were treated and blamed and were disgraced for their master's infidelity.

With her master now knowing, Harriet decides to tell her grandmother, only to be disowned and then later have pity shown to her. This reinforces the idea that Harriet is to be criticised for being raped and assaulted by her master, thus experiencing victim blaming and criticism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Chapter 10; *A Perilous Passage in Slave Girl's Life*, gives us, the reader, an insight into the life of a female slave and what she had to do in order to stay alive. This chapter describes the way she was indoctrinated into believing that it was her fault for falling pregnant and shows the way female slaves were sexually abused.

Bibliography

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[Accessed 27th November 2021]

⁷ Jacobs, Harriet, [Linda Brent], pg. 53

⁸ Jacobs, Harriet, pg. 53