Perversion of Motherhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  

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“Reader, be assured, this narrative is no fiction” (Jacobs 2). So begins Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative which, while often compared to Fredrick Douglass’s *Narrative*, stands alone in its unflattering depiction of the female slave’s maternal experience (Blackford 320). Early on, Jacobs pleads with her readers to understand the plight of the slave mother, who must suffer “peculiar sorrows,” and who must live in “the system that has brutalized her from her childhood” (Jacobs 17). This debased treatment, Jacobs explains, stems from the intrinsic imbalance of power between the slave owner and the female slave. Jacobs cites numerous examples of Dr. Flint’s behavior as proof of the all-corrupting power of slavery and its detrimental effects on the maternal experience. For her northern female audience, such desecration of the sanctity of motherhood would have been utterly shocking and disturbing; Jacobs compensates for this in several ways, particularly by focusing much of her narrative on Aunt Martha, the ideal maternal figure. Delicately choosing her words and carefully mollifying her readers, Jacobs’s presentation of motherhood as sullied by the forces of slavery can be viewed as a powerful and effective abolitionist technique. In presenting the life of the slave mother as one of constant misery and pain, Jacobs garners the deep sympathy of her readers and motivates them beyond what might be feasible in recounting her escape from slavery without focus on her maternal experience as the driving force behind her desire to be free.

The circumstances in which Jacobs becomes a mother offer the reader the first hint of the perversion of motherhood, and emphasize that for the female slave the
journey to motherhood is tainted and besmirched from the very moment of a baby’s conception. In Jacobs’s case, her decision to become a mother is triggered by Dr. Flint’s sexual conquest, which begins long before her affair with Mr. Sands. Writes Jacobs:

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission [...] Resistance is hopeless. (Jacobs 45)

Such degrading treatment of the slave girl during her formative years is only acceptable, and even expected, because of the extreme imbalance of power in the master/slave relationship. While the male slave may be beaten or killed for disobedience (Jacobs 42), the female slave’s interactions with her male superiors strip her of pride and dignity, shattering her innocence as she unwillingly enters womanhood (Jacobs 47). The mental anguish of such violation leaves the female slave desperate; Jacobs states, “I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery [...] I felt as if I were forsaken by God and by man [...] and I became reckless in my despair” (Jacobs 48). Jacobs’s recklessness is, of course, manifested in her affair with Mr. Sands and her subsequent pregnancy (Jacobs 49).
In spite of the extenuating circumstances of Jacobs’s affair, her pregnancy brings forth a new set of problems, the least of which is Dr. Flint’s forebodingly-muted reaction to the news (Jacobs 49). Interestingly, Jacobs agonizes more over telling her grandmother about her transgression than she fears Dr. Flint’s wrath, and when Aunt Martha does turn Jacobs out of the house, Jacobs is considerably wounded, stating, “I thought I could bear my shame if I could only be reconciled with my grandmother” (Jacobs 51). Aunt Martha’s initial anger again reflects the twisted state of Jacobs’s life as mother: in the eyes of the innocent young slave, pregnancy for the free women is necessarily preceded by freely and willingly choosing a husband, and is thus an occasion for joy and happiness. Jacobs, denied the freedom to choose a husband, chooses to have an affair, and in doing so realizes that her choice, consciously and deliberately executed, grants her moral integrity in spite of the loss of physical virginity (Sherman 172). This revelation is important, for it sets the stage for later moral decisions, but the mere fact that Jacobs must make that discovery at such an early age and in such desperate circumstances speaks volumes about slavery’s corruption of the new mother’s experience.

Jacobs, in revealing the particulars of her affair with Mr. Sands and the birth of her two children, treads a thin line between providing what details are necessary to compel her readers to action and what details are too sordid to be described even in the most euphemistic of passages. This trend continues with Jacobs’s discussion of her experiences as a mother, with further emphasis placed on the distortion of the natural order of familial interactions due to the oppressive forces of slavery. In one instance,
Jacobs expresses the wish that her children die in infancy, so that they might be spared
the cruelties of life as slaves (Jacobs 54). The obvious question is raised: what kind of
mother wishes her children dead? Jacobs answers quite clearly: The slave mother –
with no hope and no future, forced to watch her children enter the same life –wishes
her children dead. This statement is viewed by the reader as one of particular
poignancy, and again reflects the utter desecration of motherhood by slavery and its
perpetuators.

Jacobs’s wish that her children might die is only one of many examples of how
motherhood, refracted through the morally-shattered lens of slavery, is an almost
unrecognizable, and in some ways undesirable, institution. A discussion of Jacobs’s
motherhood and slavery would be incomplete, however, without mention of Jacobs’s
seven-year separation from her children as the primary evidence of the perversion of
motherhood. As Holly Blackford notes, “the birth of Ellen initiates Jacobs's lust for
freedom and the birth of Jacobs's appetite for being the maternal savior that must
sacrifice in an intense, purifying rite of passage through confinement. This sacrifice
symbolizes the narrative itself” (Blackford 333). Jacobs’s self-induced house arrest is
the only way she can fight the patriarchal society that would have her remain a slave
forever, but, in taking this action, Jacobs effectively ends her active role as mother of
her children. To double her agony, Jacobs is condemned to watch her children and
they move about, unable to communicate with them for fear of their own precarious
safety (Jacobs 97). The situation represents the very worst perversion of motherhood:
the forced separation of mother from her children, and the torture of having the
children close by but kept necessarily ignorant because of the tenuous secrecy of the situation. To complicate matters further, Dr. Flint has the children thrown in jail when he first hears of Jacobs’s disappearance, again exemplifying the imbalance of power that exists between the master and his slaves (Jacobs 85).

Although Incidents provides numerous examples of how motherhood has been corrupted by slavery, this does not mean that Jacobs’s moral responsibility as a mother is immediately dismissed due to her unfortunate situation. In particular, her decision to escape without her children, and to therefore leave them to face Dr. Flint’s fury (which was not, by any means, unexpected), raises questions about Jacobs’s moral conscience (Jacobs 80). Without any guarantee of success, was Jacobs’s uncertain flight and definite endangerment of her children worth the risk? As the escape plan eventually works, this question is likely unanswerable. In this case, it is more fruitful to examine the immorality of Dr. Flint’s behavior toward Jacobs and her children. While Jacobs’s moral standing at times appears ambiguous or even warped, Dr. Flint never fails to shock the reader with his selfish and vicious actions. The reader may find it difficult to define Jacobs as the definite “good” character, but it is easy to label Dr. Flint as the “evil” one. For example, almost immediately after Jacobs’s first child is born, Dr. Flint resumes his “kind offers,” but his patience for her constant rejection wanes quickly and Jacobs is seriously injured when Dr. Flint throws her down the stairs “in a fit of passion” (Jacobs 66). Upon reading this horrible passage, and many others like it, the reader is thoroughly appalled at Dr. Flint’s remorseless brutality. In light of this sort of graphic and disturbing text, the sympathetic reader is less likely to
chide Jacobs for her questionable decisions. Specifically, the juxtaposition of permanent evil over Jacobs’s occasional lapses in moral judgment helps assuage the reader’s possibly-hostile feelings toward Jacobs for leaving her children behind. In fact, Jacobs’s behavior can even be explained as a function of Dr. Flint’s immorality, for without any real power, Jacobs is forced to combat Dr. Flint in his own territory – that is, she must resort to, at the very least, stepping into the grey area between “good” and “evil” in order to make any headway with her own situation. Her methods may be far from ideal, but the sensitive reader is placated by the obvious constraints that hinder Jacobs’s plans, and thus Jacobs’s problematic moral decisions are made less disturbing when viewed in the shadow of Dr. Flint’s utter malevolence.

Jacobs pleads with her readers to “not judge the poor slave girl too severely,” but it is notable that her actions, while understandable and even justifiable due to her extreme situation, would not have necessarily been well-received by her prude, pre-Victorian audience (Jacobs 48). Indeed, Jennifer Rae Greeson points out that Jacobs would have been considered a “fallen woman” to her late-antebellum northern audience (Greeson 286). Early abolitionist writers focused exclusively on the moral depravity of slavery, but left the topic of sex and the treatment of the female slave as a sexual object largely untouched. Jacobs’s unflinching depiction of her affair and pregnancy was only acceptable to her easily-scandalized audience because she was careful to frame *Incidents* as an urban gothic novel with “the tragic heroine who stood as the bodily symbol of the ravages of corrupt oligarchy and who, by displaying her sexual scars, sensationally embodied the need for social change” (Greeson 288).
While Jacobs’s use of a familiar and socially-acceptable genre may have made her audience slightly more comfortable with her proscribed subject matter, it should be noted that Jacobs separated herself from the female writers of her time in that she did not try to reclaim the idea of traditional, female sentiment. While Jacobs may present herself as the helpless, “tragic heroine,” she simultaneously denounces such sentiment as an extension of the demeaning masculine attitude prevalent throughout the slaveholding world (Walter). This conflict of interests becomes particularly visible when Jacobs becomes pregnant for a second time. At this point, Jacobs now understands the ramifications of such an action, and yet her continued defiance of Dr. Flint, and thus of the social constraints that bind her, speaks more of her abolitionist spirit than it does her willingness to cater to the expectations of her biased readers (Jacobs 66).

If the literature of her day attempted to recover traditional female sentiment, why did Jacobs choose repeatedly to emphasize the perversion of motherhood, given her audience’s preference for romanticized, unrealistic stories? There are several possible explanations. First, as previously mentioned, Dr. Flint’s oppressive presence throughout the novel makes Jacobs’s questionable actions less intolerable. Second, as is often noted, Jacobs’s abolitionist aims would not have been realized if not for the credibility afforded by L. Maria Child’s introduction, which promotes “the thrilling immorality of the subject matter of the text while simultaneously averring the moral purpose behind that sensationalism” (Greeson 289). If Child’s statements regarding the “monstrous features” of slavery are taken as a literal warning to the reader, then it
makes sense that Jacobs would not fear her audience’s natural disdain for her sexual misdemeanors (Jacobs 5).

In addition to the written support of L. Maria Child, Jacobs’s thorough presentation of Aunt Martha as the archetypical matriarch and foil to Jacobs’s untraditional character helps readers positively embrace her story in spite of her controversial themes. Jacobs presents Aunt Martha as admirable and strong in the hopes that her readers will identify Aunt Martha as the perfect substitute for Jacobs’s slavery-corrupted maternity. Blackford notes, “Jacobs [figures] her grandmother as a transcendent spirit who contains both the power of resurrection and Christlike sacrifice” (324). This representation is most clearly portrayed by Aunt Martha’s midnight baking business, which is the source of her “economic independence […] and her empowering maternity” (Blackford 323). Through Aunt Martha’s sacrifice, Jacobs is able to formulate and execute her escape plan, and the reader, in spite of her hesitance regarding Jacobs’s actions, is likely to fully embrace Aunt Martha as a character of strength and spirit. The reader’s approval of Aunt Martha thus ameliorates possible disapproval of Jacobs’s unflattering portrayal of slavery’s influence upon motherhood.

These techniques – presenting Dr. Flint as the ultimate evil, L. Maria Child’s written approval of the narrative, and the inclusion of Aunt Martha as the ideal maternal figure – pacify the easily-shocked pre-Victorian reader and allow Jacobs to emphasize slavery’s tarnishing of motherhood without fear of alienating herself by her audience’s revulsion. The narrative’s effectiveness as abolitionist literature hinges
upon Jacobs’s ability to motivate her readers to action, which Jacobs accomplishes by conceding to conventional standards of decency while at the same time refusing to aggrandize her own competence as a mother. It is the humble humanity, the understated courage of Jacobs’s maternal experience, that resonates with the reader and forms a bond between author and audience. Motherhood, Jacobs knows, is a potent link between herself and her readers – one which defies race and social status. Enslaved or free, mothers are held in high esteem among women, which creates the perfect opportunity to expose the mistreatment of slave girls as they enter into motherhood and face its challenges under slavery’s incessant cruelty. Jacobs, expertly treading the thin line between honesty and indecency, effectively and powerfully sends this message, and in the process creates a moving piece of abolitionist literature which resounds clearly in the hearts and minds of her female readers.
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