

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and its Impact

Question and Thesis

Why is Harriet Jacobs important to the American literary canon?

Her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, introduces the lived experience of an African American slave woman into the canon, defying norms within other abolitionist literature by asserting her own agency.

Background Information

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is Harriet Jacobs' autobiographical slave narrative, published in 1861. Much like the slave narratives that came before it, it was written to inform white northerner readers of the horrors of slavery using events of her life with the hopes of radicalizing them against the institution.



Harriet Jacobs



Harriet Beecher Stowe

Key Insights

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl focuses itself on the intersectionality of being both an African American slave and a woman; not only is Harriet Jacobs abused physically by her owners, but she is also sexually preyed on by her male master. Later on, "with deliberate calculation" (Jacobs 849), she enters an affair with a white man in the hopes of being freed from slavery through him. Franny Nudelman, writing on Harriet Jacobs, states that, "Asserting illicit sexuality as an instance of her autonomy, Jacobs rejects the conventions of sexual purity all together..." (Nudelman 939). The quote states that Jacobs knowingly put herself at odds with her audience, choosing to assert her agency both within the affair itself and within recording it.

Due to their similar subject matter and intent, *Incidents* is in literary dialogue with Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Due to the novel being a work of fiction, the depictions of slaves within *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, while harrowing, feel unrealistic. After her protagonist, Tom, watches an enslaved mother have her child taken away from her by a slaver, Stowe writes, "To [Tom], it looked like something unutterably horrible and cruel, because, poor, ignorant black soul!... His very soul bled within him for what seemed to him the wrongs of the poor suffering thing that lay like a crushed reed on the boxes; the feeling, living, bleeding, yet immortal thing, which American state law coolly classes with the bundles, and bales, and boxes, among which she is lying" (Stowe 823). In the quote, the mother is solely portrayed as something pitiful, in the hopes of maximizing the audience's sympathy. Moreover, her loss of her child is treated as the ultimate failure in her role as a mother; not long after, Tom witnesses her committing suicide.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs' separation from her children is treated differently. Recounting her choice to refuse her master's offer to live with her children, knowing that it would've made escape impossible, Jacobs writes, "...I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (Jacobs 861). Defying sentimental norms within the era and especially within *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jacobs portrays herself as not someone to be pitied, but rather as someone with agency, even putting herself at an equal level as her master in terms of might. Additionally, Jacobs separating herself from her children is not portrayed as a failure, but rather as an act of love, as she chooses to bear the pain of being separated with the hope that she and her children may have brighter futures.

Conclusion

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl advances the collective study of American literature by providing a new perspective in an abolitionist dialogue dominated by white northern women and African American men. Challenging social norms within the era and sentimentalism, it set itself ahead of its time. Most importantly, it helped lay a foundation for female writers of color who came after Harriet Jacobs, as it portrays African American women as capable of possessing agency and self-determination as anyone else.

Works Cited

- Jacobs, Harriet. "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Shorter Tenth Edition Volume 1: Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Robert S. Levine, W. W. Norton & Company, 2023, pp. 831-879.
- Nudelman, Franny. "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering." *ELH*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1992, pp. 939-64. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873301>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2025.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. "Uncle Tom's Cabin." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Shorter Tenth Edition Volume 1: Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Robert S. Levine, W. W. Norton & Company, 2023, pp. 792-829.