

Characteristics of the Slave Narrative Genre in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in a Life of a Slave Girl*

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Slavery in the United States of America and its colonial predecessors lasted for almost two hundred and fifty years, from the first enslaved Africans brought to the colony of Virginia in 1619 to the constitutional abolition of slavery in 1865. Such a long period of slavery inevitably influenced literature written during that time. In fact, an entirely new genre arose during the era of slavery: the slave narrative. According to American literature professor Donna M. Campbell of Washington State University, slave narratives are “the stories of enslaved people recount[ing] the personal experiences of antebellum African Americans who had escaped from slavery and found their way to safety in the North” (Campbell par. 1). Slave narratives became one of the most controversial, but also one of the most influential genres in American literature. The usual purpose of such stories was to show the reality of the life of the slave in America and to convince people that slavery had to end. Harriet Jacobs was the first enslaved African-American woman to author her own narrative. Literature critic Armistead Lemon describes Jacobs’s narrative as “the most widely-read female antebellum slave narrative” (Lemon par. 3). Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* can be taken as an illuminating example of the slave narrative genre, revealing the characteristics of this literature, such as the structure and pattern of the story, and the literary and rhetorical devices used. Jacobs’s narrative conveys the most important aspects of the genre, enabling the reader to gain a clearer perspective on the lives of the enslaved.

Slave narratives emphasized the horrific impact slavery had on enslaved people. In their article on slave narratives, Allyson C. Criner and Steven E. Nash observe that “[slave] narrators [describe] slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation” (Criner and Nash par. 2). A slave narrative gives an inside perspective on the struggles and misery of a slave’s life. Harriet Jacobs’s main focus in her *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* seems to be to depict everything her autobiographical protagonist, Linda, endures as a slave. As shown by Jacobs, slaves are not allowed to choose whom they marry. Linda has a lover, a free black man. They love each other, but Linda’s master, Dr. Flint, does not let them even think about marriage. He tells Linda, “If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves” (Jacobs 883). This incident shows enslaved people being deprived of the right to make vital decisions about their destiny.

Even their emotional lives do not belong to them. Despite the fact that Linda later finds a way to bypass her master's ruling, she pays a big moral price for her rebellion.

Literature professor Craig White suggests that a story written in the slave narrative genre has three stages in its structure: the initial, the transitional, and the climactic. The first stage presents the author's personal experience as a slave. The transitional stage involves a moment of crisis in the narrator's life, some kind of challenge that has a big impact on the person. The final stage is the climactic stage, which most often depicts a successful escape from the slave owner (White par. 5). Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* includes all three traditional stages of slave narrative development. Linda, the first-person narrator, starts the story with the phrase "I was born a slave" (Jacobs 879). Such a beginning immediately gives the reader a perspective that frames all the subsequent events. It is an essential initial idea that extends throughout the text. The transitional or crisis stage in Jacobs's narrative is the moment when Linda makes the decision to become pregnant by Mr. Sands, a white man who likes her. Jacobs asks her "virtuous reader" not to judge her harshly because "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 888). Linda knows that what she is doing is immoral, but this is the only strategy that enables her to protect herself from Dr. Flint's harassment and to save her future child from being sold. Finally, the climactic stage of Harriet Jacobs's narration is Linda's achievement of real freedom. Even though she has escaped her owner, Linda remains a hunted fugitive until she "[is] sold at last," when her friends pay Dr. Flint's relatives to stop chasing her; this is the moment when Linda begins a truly free life (Jacobs 898). The three stages of the slave narrative appear in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, showing periods of Jacobs's life as a slave, from birth until freedom. It is a long journey with many obstacles, and only the strongest make it to the happy end.

In addition to structure, the genre of the slave narrative has a specific story pattern. Methodist University's Kelly Walter Carney, associate professor of English and co-director of Women's Studies, states that a slave narrative usually contains a depiction of events related to loss of innocence, phases of servitude, pursuit of education, acts of sexual abuse, and escape attempts (Walter Carney par. 4). The story pattern shows divisions that provide more details, breaking down the stages of the narrative. In the initial stage of Jacobs's story, a few events occur that are essential for Linda's character development. When introducing the protagonist, Jacobs stresses the time when Linda begins to learn about the world around her. For example, she discovers she is a slave only at the age of six, after both her parents die. Linda's pursuit of education commences with her first mistress, who is very kind to her and teaches her how to read. Linda says, "My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word," meaning that even her religious knowledge comes from her first owner (Jacobs 881). Linda's education in the initial stages is an essential foundation for the stage of crisis because, once taught to do the right thing, Linda is reluctant to commit immoral acts. Knowing her childhood circumstances and the little education she receives helps the reader better understand Linda's moral dilemma in the stage of crisis and transition.

Slave narratives are rich in rhetorical devices. Slave narrators often use concrete imagery to create memorable images in readers' minds. For instance, if the goal of a slave narrative is to depict the miserable life of enslaved African Americans, imagery is essential in portraying the mistreatment of the enslaved, the poor conditions in which they had to live, and all the rigorous labor imposed on them. Harriet Jacobs pays considerable



Harriet Ann Jacobs, 1 January 1894, at age 81. Photographer unknown. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=harriet+Ann+Jacobs&title=Special%3ASearch&go=Go&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Harriet_Ann_Jacobs1894.png

attention to the small details. For example, when Linda is hiding from her master in a garret, she describes the place precisely: “The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor” (Jacobs 892). This short description of a place where Linda spends seven years—as Caitlin O’Neill, a scholar in African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, comments—is “crucial to [Linda’s] activist’s beginning and is the site of her self-actualization” (O’Neill 56). Mention of the exact dimensions of the tiny room, where the woman has to spend the greater part of a decade, enables readers to visualize this garret and imagine the intensity of Linda’s desire to be free, given that she is willing to live in such darkness and constriction to avoid slavery’s worst abuses.

Apart from imagery, slave narratives often use satire or irony as one of the main rhetorical devices for story development. In her research on the rhetoric of slave narratives, Lynn A. Casmier-Paz, a professor in the English Department at the University of Central Florida, claims that Jacobs's identification in her title as a "slave girl" contradicts the wise voice of the narrator as she reports the events in the story (Casmier-Paz 107). Moreover, Casmier-Paz relates that most covers of early editions of the book depict an old woman, not a girl (107). Such contrast creates ironic contradiction that emphasizes how quickly enslaved girls had to grow up. When Jacobs describes how Linda goes to Dr. Flint to announce that she wants to marry a free black man, her words to the master sound like words of a mature woman who is ready to start a family and knows what she wants in life. This conversation happens in the fifth chapter of the narrative. However, in the tenth chapter, the reader learns that at this point Linda is "a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old" (Jacobs 887). This discrepancy creates dissonance in the mind of the reader—who is probably white and middle class—because Linda's age and her behavior are not congruent.

\$100 REWARD
WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl **HARRIET**. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.
 The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.
 All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.
JAMES NORCOM.
 Edenton, N. C. June 20 1835

Copied from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. The book states that the ad ran in the Norfolk, Virginia, *American Beacon* newspaper on July 4, 1835. Raleigh, NC: General Negative Collection, North Carolina State Archives.

The irony helps Jacobs convey that the demands of slavery forced girls to mature into womanhood too early.

Although Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* falls under the umbrella of the slave narrative genre and conforms to most of its characteristics, Albert Tricomi, a professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton, argues that Jacobs's narrative has several unique qualities. Tricomi says that Jacobs's story "absorbs many features of the biographical and the fictional slave narrative" (620). For instance, despite being based on her real-life story, the book does not completely represent Jacobs's biography. Harriet Jacobs changes the names of every character in her story in order to protect the real people she talks about in the book. The author's substitution of names may make readers question whether all the events in the story are equivalent to what happened to Jacobs in reality. Yet, because the author follows most of the best traditions of the slave narrative genre and she herself is an ex-slave and a woman, her story is still trustworthy and reliable as a portrayal of slave life.

Another characteristic of Jacobs's writing that differs from other slave narratives is her use of language. Language, especially use of dialects, is an important part of a slave narrative because the characteristic speech pattern of the enslaved show their identity. However, Jacobs, as Tricomi notes, "represents herself and her family as speakers of Standard English" (625). Usually, authors of slave narratives stress how their speech differs from their masters' because of a lack of education. With her use of proper English, Jacobs could intend to show that Linda is educated in order to make her narrator more credible to her readers, who were predominantly white people. However, the author does use dialects and classical representation of "the black dialect" (Tricomi 625). In the eighteenth chapter, "Months of Peril," Jacobs includes a dialogue with Betty that is full of the traditional depiction of the slave language. Betty says, "Honey, now you is safe. Dem devils ain't coming to search *dis* house" (Jacobs ch. 8, par. 1). Despite not using dialects in portraying Linda's speech and that of her close relatives, Jacobs still follows the classic pattern of the slave narrative genre in which black dialect is a prominent part of the story.

Slave narratives are often divided into chapters or sections that have numbers or titles. Harriet Jacobs's narrative is typical in this respect. Maria Holmgren Troy, a professor of English and director of the Culture Studies group at Karlstad University in Sweden, suggests that "fragmentation reflects the fashion in which slave families are repeatedly broken up" (Troy 20). One reason that Linda does not realize for a long time that she is a slave is that she is not separated from her family. In the beginning, she says, her parents "lived together in a comfortable home ... [and] I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise" (Jacobs 879). Linda's relatively happy childhood allows her to avoid the emotional trauma of family separation. However, later in life Linda, like Jacobs, does experience separation, first from her lover and later from her children. Jacobs's use of chapters reminds the reader of the rapid and sometimes tragic changes that slave owners imposed on the enslaved.

North Carolinian researchers Marcella Grendler, Andrew Leiter and Jill Sexton assert that "slave narratives were an important means of opening a dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom" (Grendler, Leiter and Sexton par. 3). The emergence of the slave narrative genre enabled the enslaved to express themselves, to show the reality they had lived in. Harriet Jacobs was one of the first female slave writers to tell her story to a large readership. Even though she did not always conform to all the expectations of the genre, her work is still one of the best examples of the slave narrative. Jacobs's use of irony, dialect, fragmentation and other literary devices commonly used in the genre of slave narrative help people even today understand the horrific human cost of slavery.

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