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Source: *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 167-185

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316015>

Accessed: 13/04/2010 08:28

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Moral Experience in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Sarah Way Sherman

"Slavery is terrible for men," Harriet Jacobs wrote in 1861, "but it is far more terrible for women." Citing this passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that Jacobs's book was the first to address the sexual exploitation of women under slavery. But Yellin also notes the rhetorical strain of such outspokenness. Compared to the classic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Jacobs's narrative can appear weakened by conflict. As I hope to show, however, this important book's ambivalence and troubled voice point toward its strength.¹ While the thrust of *Incidents in the Life* comes from a unequivocal denunciation of an evil system, its tension comes from a painful confrontation with moral conflict and moral ambiguity. The pseudonymous narrator, Linda Brent, is caught between the brutal, exploitative bonds of slavery and the idealized, altruistic bonds of true womanhood.²

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¹ See Jean Fagan Yellin, "Introduction," in Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), xiii-xxxiv; also, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*," in *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 262-82. For the text itself I have used the Yellin edition of Jacobs's work. In recognition of the fictional aspects of autobiography, I have referred to the author throughout as "Linda Brent." Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous readers of the *NWSA Journal* for their suggestions, as well as Patrocínio Schweickart and Lester A. Fisher for their encouragement and comments. This project was generously supported by a Faculty Summer Stipend from Dean Stuart Palmer and the College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Hampshire.

² On the ideology of true womanhood see: Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Lucy Freibert and Barbara A. White, eds., *Hidden Hands: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1790-1870* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985); and Judith Fetterley, ed., *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). For a discussion of nineteenth-century Afro-American women's responses to the cult of true womanhood, see Frances Smith Foster, "Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraits: Autobio-

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The first she resists with great spirit and no ambivalence; the other she resists only with great pain and guilt, after deep disillusionment. Both systems denied her a selfhood; neither had words to authorize her choices.

Jacobs's story, now widely available, has found new readers, particularly in college courses where it is often read alongside Douglass's *Narrative*. The differences between the two are illuminating. I should say, however, that Douglass's text may not itself be a typical slave narrative. One reason he was assimilated into the American literary canon with relative ease may have been his brilliant deployment of white conventions, particularly the developmental drama of the self-made man. There are significant parallels between the trajectory of Benjamin Franklin's rise from obscurity to political office and Douglass's own emergence from slavery into the public forum.³ One of the most important differences then between Jacobs and Douglass is gender. Gender directly shapes Jacobs's experience both as slave and free woman; moreover, gender shapes the conventions available for her interpretation of these experiences. The exemplary rise of a self-made woman was not a common literary plot. Before addressing gender differences, however, there is another key difference between Jacobs and Douglass: her early literacy and relatively privileged status as a slave.

The text opens with the lines, "I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away." Linda and her brother, William, are raised by indulgent owners. Linda's mistress teaches

graphical Writings of Afro-American Women," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 25–38.

Recent key studies of Jacobs's text include: Mary Helen Washington, "Meditations on History: The Slave Woman's Voice," in *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday Anchor, 1987), 3–15; Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 40–61; Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 28–43; and Yellin, "Introduction," in *Incidents*, xxvii–xi. Also, Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Southern Literary Journal* 19 (Fall 1986): 79–91.

³ For a discussion of the genre's conventions and Frederick Douglass's achievement within them see: Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Autobiographical Acts and the Voices of the Southern Slave"; and James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, 245–55; 148–75. On canon formation see: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Canon Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 14–50; also Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1981): 123–39.

her to read and treats her almost like a daughter. This woman had been herself nursed at the breast of Linda's grandmother; hence she is seen as the "foster sister" of Linda's own mother. Not only are the children taught to read, but they are raised within an intact black family which "fondly shields" them from the realities of slavery. Linda's father is a skilled carpenter. Her grandmother, Martha, has obtained her freedom, owns her own home, and supports herself through a lively business as a baker. This proud family holds Linda and William to the standards of middle-class behavior—the moral codes of free people—even though the two children cannot always fulfill them. The conflicts created by this situation appear early and are central to the text.

Linda, for example, describes how William is called by both his white mistress and his father. Whom should he obey? From an abstract, ideal perspective the moral claim of the father is obviously superior to that of the mistress. But in the fallen world of the slaveholding South, the father's claim is silenced. William assesses the context and goes to his mistress. For the time being, the greater good, greater even than goodness, is survival. But if William thereby escapes a whipping, or worse, he does not escape his father's wrath. He is held morally accountable and reprimanded for making the wrong choice.

The lesson that Linda and William must learn is excruciating. Although the dove of moral idealism may be beautiful, to act in a corrupt world it must learn a lesson from the serpent. Only a "fortunate fall" from innocence can develop a morality adequate to the complexity of human experience.⁴ Thus while Douglass's narrative begins with a slave who does not know he is human; this one begins with a child who does not know she is a slave. If she is to survive, she must learn not to express her humanity but to hide it; not to find her tongue but to bite it. Powerless to fulfill the moral codes, one of white society, she develops a powerful critique of those codes that assesses moral action within its human context.

This lesson is complicated by Jacobs's other difference from Douglass—her gender. If "slavery was terrible" for men like William, it was,

⁴ The themes of moral innocence and experience are, of course, central to many literatures in many cultures. This problem of the fortunate fall, however, was especially important to the fiction of Jacobs's better-known contemporaries, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Hawthorne, in particular, provides an interesting parallel because, although a representative of elite culture, he worked within some of the same codes that Jacobs did, namely evangelical Protestantism and Victorian female ideology. *The Marble Faun* and *The Scarlet Letter* (that painted a sympathetic portrait of another mother who bears an illegitimate child and whose experience forces her to question conventional morality). Significantly, these texts, among the most valued in the Anglo-American canon, are known for their exploration of moral conflict and ambiguity. Like Linda Brent's, their narrative voices are complex.

again in Linda Brent's words, "far more terrible for women." Slavery was acted out on male bodies but also within female ones. As "brood mare" or concubine, wet nurse or mammy, part of a slave woman's productive work was reproduction.⁵ Slavery's threat was therefore even the more intimate and brutal. If slavery denied the female slave's selfhood, it tempted her master to monstrous selfishness, unfettered by recognition of their common humanity.

Not only was slavery's threat more sexual for women, but genteel codes for their behavior were more stringent. The standards of free people differed for men and women. With the example of her own mother's chaste courtship and marriage ever before her, Linda is carefully indoctrinated by her mistress and family into the cult of true womanhood. The ideology of woman's innate "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" could be a significant weapon against male aggression, but it also opened new areas of vulnerability. As a model for human behavior, it had, as Linda discovers, serious flaws. "Angels in the house" might win self-respect and private influence but only by renouncing self-assertion and public power.⁶

While Linda's awareness of slavery begins at age six, with her mother's death, her moral education begins at twelve, with the death of her mistress, "almost a mother to her." She is not freed as she had come to expect but is "bequeathed" to her mistress's little niece, Emily Flint. This shock destroys whatever illusions Linda might have had about her actual condition. Not long after this first "fall," Emily's father, Dr. Flint, begins to make sexual advances. The story now takes on some qualities of a conventional seduction novel, a sentimental story of innocence pursued. Linda is not physically coerced, but she is, from puberty onward, relentlessly harassed by Flint, her master until Emily's majority. The language and plot of these sections led some critics, such as John Blassingame, to suspect that Jacobs's white editor, Lydia Maria Child influenced the text. Yellin's research, however, has shown that Jacobs herself was responsible for the text.⁷ Its words and story are essentially

⁵ On this history see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Herbert C. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House, 1976).

⁶ Daniel Scott-Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," *Feminist Studies* 1 (Winter/Spring 1973): 40-57; Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* 4 (Spring 1978), 219-36.

⁷ For the evidence behind this judgment see the "Introduction" and annotations to Yellin's edition of *Incidents*, as well as the appended letters by Harriet Jacobs herself. However, the issue has not been completely laid to rest. Yellin recently chaired a roundtable discussion of the issue, "The Ending of a White Novel? The Beginning of a Black Narrative? Authorship, Genre, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," at the American Studies

her own. While the hesitations and expressions of shame associated with Linda's sexual history may be explained by her need to appease white middle-class readers, I believe they also result from Linda's own education in genteel codes of female behavior. Again, the source was from within her own family, particularly her freed grandmother, Martha.

Martha in many ways is a model of womanly strength and integrity. A capable, devout Christian, she has earned the respect of her community, black and white. After serving as wet nurse, cook, and mammy to Mrs. Flint's mother's household for many years, she gained her freedom to become mistress of her own home. This domestic space is not only a "haven in a heartless world" but literally a means to Linda's freedom when she later hides in its shed for seven years. (Confined to a tiny alcove, concealed even from her own children, she waits for a chance to escape to the North.) If her master Dr. Flint is the text's serpent, Linda's strong and kindly grandmother is its dove. Her memory remains with Linda like "light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea."⁸ Yet that dark and troubled sea is the one which Linda has to cross.

As a young girl, Linda "had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was but a slave. I had said, 'Let the storm beat! I will brave it till I die.'"⁹ But the storm is ruthless. Not only does Dr. Flint batter her purity of mind with constant insinuations and harrassment, but he destroys any hopes for legitimate fulfillment by refusing to allow her to marry the free black man who loves her. Even if he had permitted it, the marriage would have had no legal existence because of her status as a slave. In Samuel Richardson's classic seduction novel *Pamela*, the chaste heroine triumphs when her employer and would-be seducer finally proposes marriage. But, as critic Valerie Smith points out, the happy endings of sentimental novels do not apply to a young slave girl's story.

Association Convention in Toronto, Canada (3 November 1989). During the discussion panelist Alice Deck argued that Lydia Maria Child's editorial advice rendered the authorship of *Incidents* problematic, while fellow panelists Frances Smith Foster and Henry Louise Gates, Jr. affirmed Jacobs's ultimate authorship and authority. Here, as elsewhere, Jacobs deals with the constraints of her cultural context; here, as elsewhere, she exercises her power to choose.

For the relationship between *Incidents* and the classic seduction plot, see John Blassingame, "Critical Sources on Texts," in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 367-82; John F. Bayliss, *Black Slave Narratives* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 108; Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of the Ante-Bellum Slave Narrative* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 58-59; Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative," 83-91; Smith, *Self-Discovery*, 35-43; Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 45-48.

⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 201.

⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 56.

If legitimizing Flint's sexual advances were the only issue, racist laws alone would prevent him from marrying her.¹⁰

Of course, there is one conventional ending that could apply: martyrdom. Like Clarissa of Richardson's other seduction novel, Linda could choose to die rather than to live an "impure" life: a sullied blossom in a sullied world. As in the opening story of her brother William's choice, the constant question behind Linda's life and text is: when is your humanity worth dying for? At what moment, precisely, is survival as a compromised individual too painful? Her motto, Linda Brent says, is give me liberty or give me death, but the difficulty is knowing when that final choice has come. In this case she does not die in the storm but decides instead to take a free white man as a lover. The decision brings her into direct conflict not only with her master's will but also her grandmother's values. In the genteel code, virginity before marriage was equated with female self-worth and moral integrity. For the free, middle-class woman the choice of husband was *the* choice. Through this choice she exercised the majority of what control she had over her adult life. While agonizingly limited, the choice was, nevertheless, real. Denied this choice, Brent is forced to recognize that it is through the moral exercise of her right to choose that a woman gains moral integrity, not through the physical virginity with which the choice is associated.

Thus, struggling to explain her history to white genteel readers, Brent says, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. 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."¹¹ It is the quality of the relationship that marks it as moral or immoral, not its legal status: "A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy." At this point Brent seems aware of the radical turn her remarks are taking: "There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of slavery confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible."¹² What Brent seems reluctant to say, perhaps for fear of alienating her audience, is that if slavery renders the practice of morality impossible, far from confusing all principles of morality, it may actually clarify them. Under pressure, the genuinely ethical stands out from the merely conventional.

Linda, however, is not ready to dispense with womanly purity as an ideal. She never completely abandons her grandmother's values but argues that only those who are free to uphold them should be judged

¹⁰ Smith, "Introduction," in *Narrative Authority*, 37.

¹¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55.

¹² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55.

by them. Thus her voice moves between passionate idealism and calm realism: "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."¹³ In the same passage she bravely takes full responsibility for her choice: "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation." But again, she asks her reader to read that confession within its context: "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely."

In sum her grandmother's vision of the cult of true womanhood is "beautiful" but unattainable. If Linda had that choice in this world, she would take it. But she does not. Denied the innocence of the dove, she uses the wisdom of the serpent. She chooses survival: selfhood and self-determination. Through her liaison with Mr. Sands she gains some control over her body. If she cannot marry, she can at least choose with whom she will reproduce. Citing her birthright as a mother, she argues that, "Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon. I also felt quite sure that they would be made free."¹⁴ Later she discovers that Sands is only apparently softer than Flint; both are made of the same slaveholding stuff although Sands is shiftier. Nevertheless, the central point remains; she says there is something akin to freedom in this choice, and she takes it.

But this is an understanding her grandmother does not share. She cannot contextualize her moral judgements. When Linda confesses her pregnancy, Martha's judgement is severe: "'I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.' She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. 'Go away!' she exclaimed, 'and never come to my house again.'"¹⁵ When Martha finally softens and goes to the terrified, despairing girl, she still does not give up her code: "She listened in silence. I told her

¹³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55–56.

¹⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55. Mary Helen Washington discusses the slave woman's need for control over her sexuality and her life in *Invented Lives*, xxiii–xxiv. See also Smith, *Self-Discovery*, 33.

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 56–57. A comparison between the grandmother's response and mores among plantation slaves is revealing. According to historians Jacqueline Jones and Eugene Genovese, although the slave community highly valued marital fidelity, it generally tolerated pregnancy before marriage, even when the child's father was not the young woman's eventual husband. Jones, *Labor of Love*, 34–35; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 458–75, esp. 465.

I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, 'I forgive you'; but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, 'Poor child! Poor child!'"¹⁶

As the text clearly demonstrates, Linda has no ideology or language to justify her choice. After her escape she tells the people sheltering her that she is a mother but not a wife. Although they are understanding, they caution her against such honesty in the future; it could expose her to contempt. The "delicate silence of womanly sympathy" is the best that she can expect, but that is a lot. This silence does not demand the struggle to forge explanations. It acknowledges her history's context and forgives. Hence Jean Fagan Yellin and Hazel Carby read understanding in the silence of Linda's daughter, Ellen, who tells her mother there is nothing in her past she need explain. The daughter's understanding and acceptance heal the pain of the grandmother's first rejection, yet this silence means, again, that there is finally no language of justification.¹⁷ Sexual purity remains an operative fiction: a value for that ideal world whose future possibility Linda is unwilling to give up—at the same time she must live with the reality of slavery in this one.

These issues of voice and virginity have been at the center of much critical discussion of this text. I believe, however, that Linda Brent's sexual initiation is only that, an initiation. The central experience of her mature morality is neither virginity nor its loss, but motherhood. The "moral mother" was a powerful image in Victorian ideology; one has only to think of how skillfully Harriet Beecher Stowe used it.¹⁸ Thus, as Carby suggests, while Linda's fall from sexual innocence presented problems for her white readership, as well as for herself, her resultant motherhood conferred not only new knowledge but new power.¹⁹ It is as a slave mother that Linda Brent addresses her reader; it is through this role that she claims authority to write.

The gift of motherhood, however, is also mixed, and Brent's description offers us another sobering critique. She shows how utterly inadequate

¹⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 57.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Ellen's response to her mother's history, see: Yellin, "Introduction," in *Incidents*, xiv, and Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 60–61. For a discussion of the silences within this narrative, see Smith, *Self-Discovery*, 42–43.

¹⁸ Ruth Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978):101–26; Elizabeth Ammons, "Stowe's Dream of the Mother Savior: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Women Writers Before the 1920's," in *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Harriet Jacobs's relationship to Stowe, including Stowe's unneighborly treatment of Jacobs and her daughter, is documented in *Incidents*, see particularly, 232–36.

¹⁹ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 60.

the sentimental vision of selfless motherhood was to slave realities. Of her first child, Benjamin, Linda says: "The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain. . . . I could never forget that he was a slave."²⁰ "Why," she asks, "does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?"²¹ The imagery of twining vines and tendrils is a staple of Victorian sentimentalist fiction, but in this narrative the imagery of attachment lies close to the imagery of bondage. The chapter describing Benjamin's birth is "The New Tie to Life," and the one describing Ellen's, "Another Link to Life." These children give her reason to live, but the ties that bind her to motherhood can tighten her to slavery. When Flint suspects that Linda may escape, he threatens to bring Benny and Ellen to the plantation, thinking, she writes, "that my children's being there would fetter me to the spot." He knew "that my life was bound up in my children."²²

As a slave mother, as in so many of her other roles, Linda must bear moral responsibility virtually without control, with only the slimmest margin of choice. Even before she hides in that tiny, cramped alcove, contingency hems her in at every side. At the Flint's plantation she lies down beside Ellen and "felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her." And earlier, looking on her newborn son, she states: "Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. . . . Death is better than slavery."²³ Death is the one choice she always has. While this subtext of infanticide becomes surface in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as well as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (where Cassie gives her infant laudanum), in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* it is the constant, somber background, the desperate horizon.²⁴ The other direction from freedom is nevertheless an escape. Moreover, it is the final assertion of authority: in death her children would be hers to keep.

The complexities of Linda's situation appear in a passage describing Ellen's christening. Recognizing that Linda cannot give her child the baby's father's name, Linda's father's former mistress comes forward and offers the child her Christian name, to which Linda adds her own father's surname. But, she adds, her father "had himself no legal right to it; for my grandfather on the paternal side was a white gentleman. What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!" Then, the white

²⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 62.

²¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 37.

²² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 93, 101.

²³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 86–87, 62.

²⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

mistress, by way of a gift, “clasped a gold chain around my baby’s neck. I thanked her for this kindness; but I did not like the emblem.”²⁵

At the close of a chapter entitled “Another Link to Life,” this imagery is heavily loaded. William’s initial dilemma has become more complex. He finds himself in a double-bind because he was doubly-bound: first by the legal chain of slavery, second by the reproductive chain of kinship. But now we see the two chains entwined, a tangled skein of black and white extending down through the generations. Because the chains themselves are deeply entwined, so are their moral claims. What if one’s “owner” is also one’s father?

The moral test, throughout the narrative, is love. When Sands takes his daughter Ellen with him to Washington, he does not bother to write her mother. Linda quietly comments: “The links of such relations as he had formed with me, are easily broken and cast away as rubbish.” Later, when Linda attempts to tell Ellen about her father, Ellen stops her: “‘I am nothing to my father, and he is nothing to me. . . . I was with him five months in Washington, and he never cared for me. . . . I thought if he was my own father, he ought to love me. I was a little girl then, and didn’t know any better.’”²⁶

Brent repeatedly refers to Sands’s fatherhood as “a parental relation,” a relation which “takes slight hold of the hearts or consciences of slaveholders.” Simple biological bonds are easily corrupted by power, greed, and sexuality; but most of all she laments, “how slavery perverted all the natural feelings of the human heart.”²⁷ Sands treats his child as his slave, and therefore is not worthy of being her father, is *not* her father, and has no rightful authority over her. An umbilical cord is a “tie,” but the only tie with moral authority is love.

Thus a third chain is a transcendent chain of affection, of motherly and fatherly, ultimately neighborly love. This chain transcends both slavery and biology; although it might have its roots in biological parenthood and kinship, it is not determined by them. This sacred chain, associated with the ethos of true womanhood and evangelical Christianity, presents Linda with her most painful moral dilemma: whether to run away or stay.

As Mary Helen Washington and Judith Fetterley, among others, point out, there are significant differences between the description of Linda Brent’s escape and Frederick Douglass’s.²⁸ Douglass opens by telling us how he was systematically denied the comforts of a mother and family

²⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 78, 79.

²⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 142, 189.

²⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 107, 142.

²⁸ See Washington, “Mediations on History,” in *Invented Lives*, 8; Fetterley, “Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Provisions*, 279–85; and Smith, *Self-Discovery*, 27, 33–34.

life, then passes over his courtship of his wife-to-be in a few sentences. As in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, the self which he presents is individual, strikingly outlined against the public sphere. His ultimate liberation is represented by a solitary self speaking in a voice unashamed and unconflicted before a public audience. The story of Douglass's escape from the bonds of slavery is central; the story of his loyalty to the bonds of love and friendship is peripheral.

The two stories, however, are deeply entwined in Linda Brent's narrative, and in many other male and female slave narratives. Indeed Eugene Genovese remarks that "almost every study of runaway slaves uncovers the importance of the family motive: thousands of slaves ran away to find children, parents, wives, or husbands from whom they had been separated by sale."²⁹ Other slaves, such as Henry Bibb, suffered agonies over the conflict between their desire for freedom and their responsibility to families.³⁰ Thus while resisting slavery presents no more ethical challenge to Linda Brent than it does to Frederick Douglass (she feels no moral responsibility to the Flints), leaving her children and grandmother presents a severe challenge. Honesty will not allow Linda to minimize the human consequences of this choice: her grandmother's suffering, her children's loneliness. She has defined a self, but she has defined it within the context of other selves. Bound by mutual love and responsibility, their identities are interdependent. If her obligation to her master is void, her obligation to this community is not.

When Martha first suspects Linda is planning to escape, "She looked earnestly at me, and said, 'Linda, do you want to kill your old grandmother? I am old now, and cannot do for your babies as I once did for you.'" Linda argues that only by fleeing can she keep Dr. Flint from using Benny and Ellen as a weapon to break her. In her absence he would have no reason to threaten them. Her desperate gamble is that she can work for her children's liberation from the North. Perhaps their father could buy them and set them free. But her grandmother is not so hopeful: "'Stand by your own children,'" she says, "'and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment.'" ³¹

Linda's conflicts, painful in themselves, are exacerbated by the ideology of true womanhood, represented once again by her grandmother. Both agree on the priority of Linda's duty to her children; how to fulfill that duty is the question. Linda accepts her responsibility to care for

²⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 451.

³⁰ Henry Bibb, "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave," in *Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Significance of Slave Narratives*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

³¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 91.

this community, but to do so she must care for herself. Her children's freedom depends upon her strength, her will, which must not be broken, despite her grandmother's fear and the genteel images of womanhood to which Linda might once have aspired. Ladylike martyrdom may be an option, but it is not the one Linda chooses. When Linda thinks of her daughter, and what she herself "had suffered in slavery at her age," her "heart was like a tiger's when a hunter tries to seize her young."³² Moral action, and moral resistance, demand selfhood.

The choice, however, is still painful: "I remembered the grief this step would bring upon my dear old grandmother; and nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice."³³ And her grandmother does not let her off easily: "Whenever the children climbed on my knee, or laid their heads on my lap, she would say, 'Poor little souls! what would you do without a mother? She don't love you as I do.'"³⁴ Even though she knows the accusation is false and prompted by a human fear, Brent's narrative is haunted by guilt. In the midst of her first escape she imagines her grandmother saying, "'Linda, you are killing me.'"

But if Linda does not obey her grandmother, neither does she judge her, for these feelings are ones she has shared. Early in the story, when her uncle Benjamin tells her about his plan to leave, Linda's first response is "'Go . . . and break your mother's heart.'"³⁵ Though she immediately regrets the words, they are out. When her brother William makes his break, we see again that the heart's spontaneous reaction is not joy but grief: "If you had seen the tears, and heard the sobs, you would have thought the messenger had brought tidings of death instead of freedom."³⁶ These are people whose lives are bound up with those they love. Even when separation brings freedom, it brings pain. As her ship finally approaches Philadelphia and freedom, Linda sees what she calls not the City of Brotherly Love but "the city of strangers." She looks at her companion, also an escaping slave, "and the eyes of both were moistened with tears. We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery."³⁷

Given the text's focus on mothering, the fact and imagery of nursing—both as physical breastfeeding and as emotional nurturing—are key

³² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 199.

³³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 95.

³⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 92.

³⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 21.

³⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 134.

³⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 158.

throughout. If the perversion of human relations appears in the white father who sells his child into oppression; the ennobling of human relations appears in the black mother who nurtures the child of her oppressor. And this, of course, is Martha herself, who takes her own child off her breast in order to suckle the child of her beloved mistress. This white baby becomes in her eyes the “foster-sister” of her own child, Linda’s mother. There is indeed a curious doubling in the text. Linda Brent’s mother dies but is survived by a twin, Aunt Nancy.³⁸ The white foster daughter dies but leaves a sister. This sister becomes the revengeful Mrs. Flint, a frightening image of the slave-mistress.

Aunt Nancy’s story is one of the most painful stories Brent tells. Nancy sleeps at the foot of Mrs. Flint’s bed, undergoing a harrowing series of premature births and miscarriages while waiting on her foster sister, her white mistress. Mrs. Flint in turn gives birth to her own children, whom Nancy must raise. Nancy’s fertility is literally sacrificed to her “sister’s.” When she finally dies, the letter describing her death—a letter probably written by Dr. Flint—blasphemously imitates the language of community: “Could you have seen us round her death bed, mingling our tears in one common stream, you would have thought the same heartfelt tie existed between a master and his servant, as between a mother and her child.”³⁹ But of course the same heartfelt tie does not exist between a master and his servant. Not only is the servant forced to care for the master, but this care is not reciprocated. Mrs. Flint wants Nancy buried in their own plot as a sign of Nancy’s devotion to her “family”; Linda’s grandmother adamantly refuses. The true family is the one in which Nancy’s care was returned. Aunt Martha claims ownership of her daughter’s body at last.

But Martha’s relationship to Mrs. Flint remains one of the most troubling in the book. This revengeful woman *is* her foster daughter, not just in name but in emotional reality. In extending her care to her owner’s child, Martha blurred the boundaries between self and other, and with them, slave and master, white and black. According to racist ideology, a mother’s milk cannot miscegenate. The merging of nurse and child was considered free from the taint of racial definition, and in this text its love is innocent: the milk of human kindness. The memory of this bond lays a claim on the old grandmother’s loyalty. When Mrs. Flint won’t speak to her former nurse, Linda writes, “This wounded my grandmother’s feelings, for she could not retain ill will against the woman whom she had nourished with her milk as a babe.” When Dr. Flint questions her, Martha simply says, “Your wife was my foster-

³⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 281. According to Yellin, this is one of the few places in which Jacobs fictionalized her history, perhaps to make this moral point.

³⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 72.

child, Dr. Flint, the foster-sister of my poor Nancy, and you little know me if you think I can feel any thing but good will for her children.' ” Martha’s love for Mrs. Flint was, and remains, unconditional; she is indeed a dove. In a better world such goodness would confer moral authority. Linda admits that Dr. Flint was held at bay many times by her grandmother’s reputation, but when Martha goes to Flint to plead for her granddaughter—reminding “him how long and how faithfully she had served in the family, and how she had taken her own baby from her breast to nourish his wife”—the doctor simply ignores her claims.⁴⁰ Here the ideology of true womanhood fails. Moral example alone is no match for positive evil.

One could argue, however, as Hazel Carby does, that Martha’s behavior in this and other key instances is not submissive, but assertive. She is, Carby writes, “representative of a strong moral code in the midst of an immoral system.”⁴¹ She acts on behalf of the entire community of her care, black and white. The problem is that she has no power to enforce that code. By extending her love to a corrupt foster daughter, Martha endangers the other members of the community for whom she cares. By rejecting Mrs. Flint she would lose her Christ-like purity. The dove must learn a lesson from the serpent if it is to survive, and its peaceable kingdom come into this world, not just the next. Finally, even Martha is forced to agree that the greater good of Linda’s escape justifies active resistance, including lies and deceit. She hides Linda in that womb-like, coffin-like space for seven years, caring for little Benjamin and Ellen all that time: a brave defiance of her own fear and honesty.⁴²

Of course, Aunt Martha’s love for her white foster children is not always the case in black literature. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, attachment to the oppressor’s child appears as moral failure, a capitulation

⁴⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 85. Genovese’s comments on the role and situation of black mammies are particularly helpful here: “That they loved the white children they raised—hardly astonishing for warm, sensitive, generous women—in no way proves that they loved their own children the less. Rather, their position in the Big House, including their close attention to the white children sometimes at the expense of their own, constituted the firmest protection they could have acquired for themselves and their immediate families.” But, as Genovese points out and as *Incidents* demonstrates, this protection was extremely limited, resting as it did solely on personal influence (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 356–57).

⁴¹ Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 57.

⁴² Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 360–61, again illuminates the problems which Martha poses to her granddaughter: “More than any other slave, [the mammy] had absorbed the paternalistic ethos and accepted her place in a system of reciprocal obligations defined from above. In so doing she developed pride, resourcefulness, and a high sense of responsibility to white and black people alike, as conditioned by the prevalent systems of values and notions of duties. . . . Her tragedy lay, not in her abandonment of her own people but in her inability to offer her individual power and beauty to black people on terms they could accept without themselves sliding further into a system of paternalistic dependency.”

lation to white fantasies. In one excruciating scene Pauline rejects her own daughter in favor of the pretty white child who calls her Polly in the fancy house by the lake.⁴³ The implications and dangers of such nonreciprocal, powerless mothering are heightened in the horrifying violation of Sethe in *Beloved*. Forcibly taking milk meant for her child, the two white boys “with mossy teeth” pervert the sign of Sethe’s womanly power and love freely given.⁴⁴ In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* Sofia refuses to lie about loving her white “foster daughter’s” child: “Some colored people so scared of whitefolks,” she says, “they claim to love the cotton gin.” Sofia does not deny she “feels something” for Eleanor Jane herself, “because out of all the people in your daddy’s house you showed me some human kindness. But on the other hand, out of all the people in your daddy’s house, I showed you some.” Unlike Aunt Martha’s, Sofia’s love is conditional: “Kind feelings is what I offer you. I don’t have nothing to offer your relatives but just what they offer me.”⁴⁵

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* we see a black nursemaid who slaps the face of her dead mistress while the child she cares for, the child of the dead woman, looks on (the child tells and the nurse is sold). Here, however, as in *The Color Purple*, the white child before the corruption of consciousness may be worthy of love because that child may be capable of giving love. At the end of her long flight north, Linda Brent says she was so disillusioned that she was in danger of losing her compassion and hope. In the chapter called “A Home Found” she describes how Mary, her white employer’s daughter, “thawed my heart, when it was freezing into cheerless distrust of all my fellow-beings.” “I loved Mrs. Bruce’s babe. When it laughed and crowed in my face, and twined its little tender arms confidingly about my neck . . . my wounded heart was soothed.”⁴⁶

The infant is not the source of the slave woman’s exploitation. Although a black baby may be denied nourishment given to its white “sister,” the demand is the slaveholder’s, not the inarticulate child’s. Brent reiterates her faith that “surely little children are true.” In one parable-like story we see that truth uncorrupted: “I once saw two beautiful sisters playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was a slave, but also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight.”⁴⁷ This Edenic moment is inevitably doomed. The serpent of

⁴³ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 87.

⁴⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 70.

⁴⁵ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 233.

⁴⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 190, 170.

⁴⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 29.

slavery and white male sexuality insinuate themselves into the slave girl's innocence. She becomes aware of her difference, her enslavement, and her sexual vulnerability. Finally, she must drain "the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink."⁴⁸

And what of her white sister? "From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning."⁴⁹ But Brent stops at the bridal morning for good reason. If the serpent enters the slave girl's life at puberty, he enters her white sister's at marriage. Unchecked power and sexual exploitation make betrayal by her husband almost inevitable. Moral corruption blights her happiness and "ravages" her home, with its twining vines, "of all its loveliness."

This is the source, Brent implies, of Mrs. Flint's venom, the motivation behind her attack on the daughter of her foster sister and grandchild of her foster mother. Sexual jealousy, the "green-eyed monster," is personified in this woman's vindictiveness.⁵⁰ Brent is unsparing in her portrayal of that vindictiveness, but in an act of remarkable compassion, she writes, "Yet I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her than he had, whose duty it was to make her life happy. I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet."⁵¹ Although deeply corrupted by slaveholding's unchecked power, Mrs. Flint persecutes Linda primarily out of helplessness and misery. The true source of her anger is her husband, but in a patriarchal world she too can be rendered powerless against him.

Linda Brent's story opens with the death of her white mistress. Her grief is real, "for she had been almost like a mother to me."⁵² But this death brings another. When the will is read, Linda learns she has not been freed but "bequeathed" as a piece of property. "My mistress taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.' But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor."⁵³ This "one great wrong," emblem of slavery's moral blindness, cannot be forgotten or forgiven, but it is countered at the book's close by an act of neighborly love and courage.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 29.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 29.

⁵⁰ See Minrose C. Gwin, "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives," in *Conjuring*, ed. Pryse and Spillers, 39–52.

⁵¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 32.

⁵² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 7.

⁵³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 8.

After Linda's escape to the North she is employed by a Mr. and Mrs. Bruce as nursemaid for their daughter. Although the husband appears both obtuse and sympathetic to slaveholding, Mrs. Bruce is remarkable for her understanding and support. When Mrs. Bruce dies, the second wife proves even more remarkable. When Linda is threatened with capture by Mr. Dodge (her new master via his marriage to Emily Flint), the second Mrs. Bruce not only helps Linda escape once more but proposes she take Mrs. Bruce's own baby with her. If Linda is found, she reasons, the slavecatchers would be forced to return the white child to its mother before taking Linda south; Mrs. Bruce could then intervene on her behalf. Brent writes: "It was a comfort to me to have the child with me; for the heart is reluctant to be torn away from every object it loves. But how few mothers would have consented to have one of their own babies become a fugitive, for the sake of a poor, hunted nurse."⁵⁴ The sisterhood of that earlier Edenic image can be regained. Mrs. Bruce does recognize Linda as her neighbor. By risking her child, she assumes that neighbor's danger as her own.

But Linda's tale here also is "bittersweet," a word which reappears throughout the text. While Linda is in hiding with Mrs. Bruce's child, Mrs. Bruce writes that she intends to buy her from Mr. Dodge and end her persecution. Linda's response is sharply mixed. Although she is grateful, "The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph." Linda writes to thank Mrs. Bruce but also to say "that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that such a great obligation could not be easily cancelled; and that I preferred to go to my brother in California."⁵⁵ She will take her stand on principle, uncompromised, passionate. Mary Helen Washington is correct in seeing this statement as Linda Brent's forthright assertion of selfhood, which is comparable to Frederick Douglass's rejection of *any* master, kind as well as cruel.⁵⁶

Yet, here too, there is a difference; without Linda's knowledge, Mrs. Bruce goes ahead with the negotiations and purchases her friend's freedom. Again, Linda's response is deeply ambivalent. In her description of the bill of sale, the sentences themselves are split, pitting feeling against feeling: "I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom I do not like to look upon it. I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or

⁵⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 194.

⁵⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 199.

⁵⁶ Washington, "Meditations on History," in *Invented Lives*, 11–12.

his.”⁵⁷ Despite her objections to the means, the end has been reached. Linda confesses that “when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders.” She accepts the gift and does not judge Mrs. Bruce for dealing with slaveholders, any more than she judged her brother William for going to his mistress instead of his father, or her grandmother for preferring a living slave child to a lost free one. Mrs. Bruce has compromised a principle to gain Linda’s freedom, and though Linda’s bitterly resents the necessity, she forgives the act. After all, she has struck her own bargains with the devil.

“When I reached home, the arms of my benefactress were thrown round me, and our tears mingled.” The imagery echoes the language of Dr. Flint’s blasphemous letter at Nancy’s death, but here the mutual identification is real. As Mrs. Bruce explains, “You wrote me as if you thought you were going to be transferred from one owner to another. But I did not buy you for your services. I should have done just the same if you were going to sail to California tomorrow. I should, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that you left me a free woman.”⁵⁸ Linda cannot help but remember how her father and grandmother had struggled to buy her freedom, and failed: “But God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon.” Mrs. Bruce, Brent writes, is her friend. “Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred.” As her narrative closes Linda Brent describes herself as “bound” to Mrs. Bruce’s side, not by slavery and not only by economic circumstances but also by “love, duty, gratitude. . . .”⁵⁹

“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.” The difference, however, goes even deeper. If her story does not end in the conventional feminine way, neither does it represent freedom in the conventional masculine way. Linda Brent’s narrative ends, not with a solitary speaker, but with a woman gratefully acknowledging her bonds to her children and friends, bonds freely chosen. She has recovered her two children, Benjamin and Ellen. Although she still

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 200.

⁵⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 200.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 201. A related pattern emerges in Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Berkley, 1986). Though more conflicted than the friendship of Linda Brent and Mrs. Bruce, the relationship of the escaped slave Dessa Rose and the white woman Miss Rufel is also rooted in the bonds of motherhood. Miss Rufel, raised by a beloved black nurse, gives her breast in turn to Dessa Rose’s newborn child. If the white woman here becomes the mammy, in *Beloved* she becomes the midwife. In Denver’s caring for the laboring Sethe we also see an unusual white woman able to resist the temptation of racist power. Like the Good Samaritan, she recognizes the other as her neighbor.

does not have a home of her own, her family is intact and free. The nineteenth-century vision of domesticity has become a kind of operative fiction: a Christian community of true sisterhood and brotherhood, based on mutual interdependence and identification, neighbor love. The power of this text, however, is its demonstration that moral action is not the work of pure, ego-less angels but of loving, self-determined women and men. The community of care cannot be sustained in a fallen, corrupted world merely through the innocence of the dove but requires the wisdom of the serpent to survive and prevail. Principled yet pragmatic, defiant and compassionate, Linda Brent's bittersweet voice is the voice of moral experience. Like Ralph Ellison's invisible man deep below his city's streets, she has emerged from her hiding place with a painful, healing knowledge. Ellison's hero closes by offering us that knowledge: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you."⁶⁰ Perhaps Linda Brent does too.

⁶⁰ Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1947), 439.