

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs)

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Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is only now emerging as the classic narrative of a woman slave, a work to rank with the several autobiographies of Frederick Douglass. Published under a pseudonym in 1861, edited by a white abolitionist, and borrowing form and rhetoric from sentimental novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the work remained suspect for 120 years. Only in 1981, when Jean Fagan Yellin published documentary evidence of Jacob's authorship (*American Literature*, November 1981: 479-86), did recognition come that this is a major work of African American literature, as well as an essential document for the history of slavery. Her bold discussion of sexual relations between the races prepared her audience in the North for the images of slave and slaveholder families such as those of Figures 8 and 9 in the visual portfolio "Slavery and Freedom" (Page 256.) Jacobs (1813-1897), writing under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, emerges as a remarkably determined woman. To prevent the permanent enslavement of her children, she hid for seven years in the attic of her grandmother's house, a tiny space only three feet high, while deceiving her master into thinking she had escaped to the North by smuggling out letters to be mailed from New York City and Boston. Finally she and then her children escaped from slave territory to discover the ambiguities of freedom in the so-called free states.

The next step is to read the following sections from the text: V - Trials of Girlhood, X - A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life, XVIII – Months of Peril, and XXI – The Loophole of Retreat. After reading each section summarize each of the passages in a paragraph. Then answer the following questions: What does the Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) account of her experiences add to our picture of slavery? Does she see herself as a victim? What does she emphasize about her reaction to the position her master placed her in? Do you see her decision as a moral one or immoral? (Defend your choice) How do her choices impact others? Does she have more or less freedom than most slaves?