

Diamond Johnson

Ps&Qs: Harriet Jacobs *Incidents of The Life of a Slave Girl*

Thesis: The experience of motherhood while being enslaved frequently appears as Linda attempts to figure out her values and beliefs of being a mother and the detrimental effect of enslavement while being a mother had on her.

Passage One

“Early the next morning I left my grandmother’s with my youngest child. My boy was ill, and I left him behind. I had many sad thoughts as the old wagon jolted on. Hitherto, I had suffered alone; now, my little one was to be treated as a slave. As we drew near the great house, I thought of the time when I was formerly sent there out of revenge. I wondered for what purpose I was now sent. I could not tell. I resolved to obey orders so far as duty required; but within myself, I determined to make my stay as short as possible”(16).

- “Early the next morning” – The word “Early” means “happening or done before the usual or expected time.” The word “next” means “the following.” The word “morning” is “the period of time between midnight and noon”
- “left my grandmother’s with my youngest child” – “Left” means to “go away from.” Although Linda is always “leaving” she is always working towards something. Jacobs presents imagery of Linda leaving her grandmothers house which is her safe space, with her youngest child.
- “My boy was ill, and I left him behind” – “ill” means “not in full health.” Enslaved individuals were prone to sickness more so than those that weren’t. They did not have access to medicine as much as white people did. Again, the word “left” is brought into the picture. The image her abandoning her children goes across Lindas mind
- “many sad thoughts as the old wagon jolted on” – The word “sad” means “full of sorrow and upsetness.” The word “Jolted” means “move with sudden lurches” By using the word

“jolted,” Jacobs is using very effective diction to explain a simple movement.

- “Hitherto, I had suffered alone;” – The word “Hitherto” means “until now.” Being a mother means you have to think of your children first and Jacobs has Linda realize she is no longer on her lonesome.
- “my little one was to be treated as a slave.” – The word “Treated” means “deal with in a certain way.” The word “Slave” means “Someone forced to work and is considered property” To be treated as a slave for many mothers was worrisome because mothers did not have control over what happened to their children. They would have to stand on the sidelines and watch them be treated like a “slave.”
- “drew near the great house” – The word “drew” means to “Go closer to.” The phrase “Great house” means “Big Home” but it can also be called a big house an “Enslaver” lives in.
- “formerly sent there out of revenge.” – The word “formerly” can mean “Previously.” The word “sent” means “to make something go forward.” The phrase “out of revenge” means “the action of inflicting hurt or harm on someone for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands”
- “for what purpose I was now sent” – The word “purpose” means to “the reason for which something is done or created” Many enslaved individuals' only purpose was to provide services to their enslavers and to be “good.” Jacobs is letting the audience in on Lindas thoughts upon being sent here asking herself “What is her purpose here?”
- “could not tell” – In this portion of the sentence structure, she is conflicted and can not tell her purpose here.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “resolved to obey orders so far as duty required;” – The phrase “resolved to obey” means determined to do something.” In Linda's case, do as she is told and stay quiet. ● “Within myself, I determined to make my stay as short as possible” – The word “determined” means “having made a firm decision and being resolved not to change it” The word “Stay” can mean to “remain put.” The word short means to “take a small amount of time.”. Linda is already planning on continuing her and her kids' journey to freedom but nonetheless being smart and patient about it. Through Jacob's superb imagery, we see Linda obeying but patiently waiting on her window of opportunity to open.
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This passage has a lot of information that can be discussed regarding Linda's optimism to make sure her children did not suffer the same way she did. Jacobs continues to write her in a very optimistic, nonetheless conflicted way. Although a small fact, most enslaved individuals commuted either exceptionally early in the morning or extremely late at night. Jacobs mentions this when she mentions Linda leaving “Early in the morning.” Linda leaves her ill son, and she feels hugely guilty for it. Many mothers do not want to leave their children when they are sick. Linda, however, did not have a choice; this is where her motherly instincts came to light. Jacobs’ phrasing of “many sad thoughts as the old wagon jolted on” provides profound imagery of her and Ellen being wheeled away from her sick boy and Linda being sorrowful. In this scene, she feels like she is “abandoning” her son, which is discussed and mentioned in other passages. Jacobs' word choice of “Hitherto” is unique. Hitherto means “until now.” Linda realizes that “until now,” she was on her lonesome, and now she has children that do keep her company, but nonetheless, she has to keep them safe and put them first in her life. Jacobs' motherhood theme in this passage is highly present by showing Linda's worries about her son and her realization that although she isn't lonely, she has to protect them from experiencing slavery in the same manner. Jacobs has Linda question her “purpose” upon being taken to the “great house,” which, again, is significantly emphasizing word choice instead of saying something generic. Linda, however, is going to obey but is patiently awaiting her opportunity to get out and save both of her children from slavery. Jacobs writes Linda's character to be intelligent, strategic and determined solely for the sake of her children, which shows her many motherhood qualities and traits.

Passage Two

“I wished to appear as contented as possible. Sometimes I had an opportunity to send a few lines home; and this brought up recollections that made it difficult, for a time, to seem calm and indifferent to my lot. Notwithstanding my efforts, I saw that Mr. Flint regarded me with a suspicious eye. Ellen broke down under the trials of her new life. Separated from me, with no one to look after her, she wandered about, and in a few days cried herself sick. One day, she sat under the window where I was at work, crying that weary cry which makes a mother’s heart bleed. I was obliged to steel myself to bear it.” (16).

- “wished to appear” – The word wished means “hope for something that is not easily attainable.” The word “appear” means “come into sight.”
- “contented as possible.” – The word “contented” means “happy and at ease.” The phrase “as possible” can mean “able to be done.” It is interesting Jacobs uses the word “contented” instead of “content”
- “Sometimes I had an opportunity to send a few lines home;” – The word “sometimes” can mean “not often but enough.” The word “opportunity” means “a good chance for advancement” Through countless research, the “word” line can mean both a shape and rope. However, I am not sure what Jacobs was referring to here when she had Linda say “send a few lines home.” Either way, I am sure it was a big help for her family. The diction in this phrase could be used better.
- “brought up recollections that made it difficult,” – “brought up recollection” simply means “remembering or recalling” something that has occurred.
- “for a time, to seem calm and indifferent to my lot.” – “for a time” means lasting a long while. The phrase “To seem calm and indifferent in my lot” lets the readers imagine that Linda is doing what she must do now to have a chance of success later.
- “Notwithstanding my efforts,” – The word “notwithstanding” means “in spite of” while “efforts” mean “attempts of determination” Throughout this passage, Jacobs uses good images of a patient Linda that is

quiet but determined to do what she has to do.

- “Mr. Flint regarded me with a suspicious eye.” – “Regarded” means “Consider” and “Suspicious eye” means “doubtful.” Dr. Flint was very leery of Linda and what she was up to.
- “Ellen broke down under the trials of her new life.”-- The word “Trials” can mean “a test of the performance and qualities about something.” Most of the time, trials are seen as hard times in one's life. Enslaved individuals had many trials and tribulations in their lives.
- “Separated from me, with no one to look after her” – “Separated” means to depart from someone or something. Separating from your loved ones can cause many “Trials” in one's lifetime as it did for many Enslaved Individuals who were separated from their family and their home. Jacobs brings that to light with her choice of diction and sentence structure. “Look after Her” is a phrase of protection Jacobs is offering.
- “She wandered about, and in a few days cried herself sick” – ‘Wandered about’ means to “walk around aimlessly” The word “aimlessly” can mean to have no will or desire for what's next. “Cried herself sick” means someone is crying so much they become unwell from it either physically, mentally, or emotionally.
- “One day, she sat under the window where I was at work crying that weary cry” – “crying that weary cry” means to “cry tirelessly” Jacobs usage of “weary” shows a unique interpretation of word choice
- “makes a mother’s heart bleed” – the word “mother” means “a woman in relation to her child.” The word “heart” means “hollow muscular organ

	<p>that pumps the blood through the circulatory system” Finally, the word “bleed” means “lose blood from the body as a result of injury.” Jacobs solidifies Lindas' pain by comparing it to her own heart bleeding when hearing her daughter's weary cry.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I was obliged to steel myself to bear it.” – “Obliged” means “Compel.” The phrase “To steel myself to bear it” means “Mentally prepare” and “to go through and endure it.”
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Throughout this heavy and emotionally charged passage, Linda observes her daughter undergo many trials. Linda attempts to remain “calm and content” in her “lot,” so she does not draw that much attention. She is waiting for a keen opportunity to free her family. However, her daughter Ellen is not doing too well. Ellen realizes what is happening around her and does not like it. Linda can not do much except watch and listen to her daughter as she hears her “weary cry” constantly. Jacobs phrases this heartbreak as “mother’s heart bleed. I was obliged to steel myself to bear it”, which can be tear-jerking to the audience, showing that she is going through so much pain watching her daughter be in pain. Linda mentions that she has to mentally prepare for her cries and has to endure them without being able to do anything about the situation. Linda is again conflicted about what to do when it comes to doing what best for her children and herself is. She is conflicted in this passage and wants to protect her daughter, but there isn't much she can do, and she must be patient. Jacobs has written this story while emphasizing Linda's patients and strong willpower to continue being determined for her children. This passage represents that she will go through with everything patiently, but she knows that going slow will ultimately bring out the best life for her and her children, even if it means to continue struggling in the present moment.

Passage Three

“During the day my meditations were very sad. Sometimes I feared I had been very selfish not to give up all claim to her, and let her go to Illinois, to be adopted by Mrs.Sands’s sister. It was my experience of slavery that decided me against it. I feared that circumstances might arise that would cause her to be sent back. I felt confident that I should go to New York myself; and then I should be able to watch over her, and in some degree protect her.” (27).

- “During the day” – The word “During” means “Throughout the entire time.” The word “day” means “Corresponds when the sun is out illumination daytime.”
- “my meditations were very sad.” – The word “meditations” means to “think deeply. Meditation can relax and calm the soul. However, they can also evoke many deep emotions from the body.
- “Sometimes I feared” – “Feared” means to “be afraid of (someone or something)” Many enslaved individuals were scared and had fear. Fear of being tortured, murdered, or caught in a rough spot. Linda, in this case, is fearful internally and maternally that she made the wrong decision.
- “Had been very selfish not to give up all claims to her” – The word “Selfish” means to think of one's values and beliefs without any regard of what others think. Selfishness is purely “lacking consideration for others; concerned chiefly with one's own personal profit or pleasure”
- “and let her go to Illinois, to be adopted by Mrs.Sands’s sister” – The phrase “Let go” means to “relinquish one's grip on someone.” The word “adopted means to “legally take (another's child) and bring it up as one's own.”
- “It was my experience of slavery that decided me against it” – The word experience means “practical contact with and observation of facts or events.” Here Jacobs is having Linda recognize her own experience of slavery and the effects it could potentially have on her own children.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I feared that circumstances” – Again the word “feared” is being used by Jacobs signaling the conflict with Linda of bouncing in between fearful yet determined. ● “might arise that would cause her to be sent back.” – Again, the word “sent” is being used to talk about human beings. This just shows how Jacobs is emphasizing the dehumanizing of enslaved individuals that occurred. ● “felt confident” – The word felt means “To feel an emotion or something physical.” The word confident means to be “self-assured.” ● “should go to New York myself” “and then I should be able to watch over her, and in some degree protect her”-- The term “watch over her” and “protect her” is used as substantial word choice emphasizing the Father and Mother role Linda has played when it comes to caring for her little ones.
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Throughout the passage, Linda is nervous that she isn't doing what she could have done as a mother by not giving up her daughter. She is fearful Ellen will go through the exact trials and tribulations she went through. Linda emphasizes the importance of her role as a mother and shows that she will not just have to be nurturing but the sole protector of her children. Jacobs is offering the concept of motherhood within Linda but unable to adhere to her motherly instincts – to protect her daughter ultimately. Linda knows what many men can do to a young and innocent girl because she was once that girl. She knows, ultimately, that she is their children's only protector. Jacobs emphasizes that Linda feels “Selfish” not letting Ellen go to Illinois to be adopted by Mrs. Sands. However, Jacobs has her also feeling “Confident” she should go to New York and watch over her daughter herself. Jacobs visually makes Linda very conflicted about how she feels and what she should do as a mother. This passage plays a vital role in noticing the motherly instincts Linda wants to act on. Linda does everything solely for her children so they do not have to experience being enslaved as she did. Jacobs presents an essential symbolism of Linda and her family going from one home to another when she truly wants a single home for her and her kids to feel truly content and free. The phrase, “watch over her, and in some degree protect her,” is Jacobs incubating Linda into being both the mother who watches over and nurtures and the father who protects.

Passage Four

“I pressed her to my heart, then held her away from me to take a look at her. She had changed a good deal in the two years since I parted from her. Signs of neglect could be discerned by eyes less observing than a Mother’s.” (32).

- “Pressed her to my heart” — “Pressed means “smoothed by the application of pressure” Jacobs’ word choice is substantial because she could have simply said “Hugged” or “cuddled” but she emphasizes it more with that word choice.
- “then held her away from me to take a look at her.” – “then held her away” means to many mothers to get a good look at their child and make sure they are okay. Jacobs’ word choice and sentence structure call for simplicity
- “She had changed a good deal in the two years since I parted from her.” – The word “parted” means separation from someone or something. Normally, for a long time.
- “Signs of neglect” – “Signs” “means an object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else.” and “Neglect” means “fail to care for properly.”
- “could be discerned by” – The phrase “could be” means “potentially” and the word “discerned” means to “recognize”
- “eyes less observing than a mother’s.” –The diction in this phrase emphasizes the “motherly instincts” theme Jacobs writes about. The word choice and sentence structure of “eyes less observing than a mothers” shows the careful consideration Jacobs acquired instead of saying simple words and phrases. You can tell she wanted her audience to feel the bluntness and realness of the situation.

This brief, but compelling passage represents Linda and her motherly instincts. With motherhood comes solid maternal instincts for not just your kids but others as well. Mothers are more

attentive to detail when it comes to their instincts. They can feel when something is off, and Jacobs is keen on creating imagery and an adequate tone throughout this passage to represent that concept. As soon as she reunites with Ellen after two very long years, she embraces her ever so strongly. Jacobs' word choice of “pressed” suggests a warm embrace between the pair. Jacobs uses “pressed” to not sound mundane and generic in her writing but unique and realistic. Like any other mother, she wants to look at her child to see what has changed. Linda could tell she was not adequately cared for and had been “Neglected.” With Jacobs using the word “Neglected,” it immediately makes us think of “Child neglect,” however, Ellen is enslaved and is dehumanized, so therefore, in the enslavers' eyes, she was "treated like a slave," Linda's biggest fear, suggesting she was not cared for. The phrase “eyes less observing than a mother” shows that Linda was aware that a “mother's eye” is keener on their own children than a stranger's. This phrase harps on the motherly instincts and ways she knows when her children are doing well vs. when they are not. Linda notices every little detail about them, and Jacobs emphasizes those images through efficient word choices that are descriptive, tone, and sentence structure.

Passage 5

<p>“Ah, my child,” said she, “don’t trust too much to him. Stand by your own children, 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. If you go, you will make me miserable the short time I have to live. You would be taken and brought back, and your sufferings would be dreadful. Remember poor Benjamin. Do give it up, Linda. Try to bear a little longer. Things may turn out better than we expect.” (16)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Ah, my child” – Linda’s grandmother is referring to Linda as one of her own and recognizes she may also seem to be making decisions like a child would. ● “don't trust too much to him” – “Trust” means to “firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something” Her grandmother is advising Linda to not put her children's chance of freedom in the hands of their father who could “care less” and one she can not trust. ● “Stand by your own children, suffer with them till death” – “Stand” means to “have and maintain” and “Suffer” means to “experience something bad.” Harriet Jacobs used these simple but powerful words to heighten the emotional weight and seriousness of the truth of enslavement while being a mother. ● “Nobody respects a mother who
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forsakes her children” – “Forsakes” means “Abandon”. Linda's grandmother expressed she felt like she was abandoning them constantly. Linda's grandmother also kept in mind other people's opinions of Linda.

- “If you leave them, you will never have a happy moment.” – “Leave”. Linda's grandmother again refers to the idea of Linda abandoning her children. “Happy” means “feeling or showing pleasure.” Linda will never feel truly “Happy” until she and her children are free.
- “If you go, you will make me miserable the short time I have to live” – Throughout this portion, Jacobs writes to Linda's grandmother to show a “worried” tone in hopes it will change Linda's mind about leaving. Jacobs chooses to make the tone very worrisome and dark.
- “You would be taken and brought back, and your sufferings would be dreadful.”-- “Taken and brought back” To “Take” means “lay hold of (something) with one's hands” and “brought back” means to “return something.” It shows how enslaved individuals were treated as items of property instead of humans.
- “Remember poor Benjamin” – “Remember” means to “Recall” and “Poor” means “worse than is usual.” Jacobs's word choice emphasizes that Linda recalls an unfortunate thing with her son.
- “Try to bear a little longer. Things may turn out better than we expect.” – Try means to “Attempt”, and “Bear a little longer” means to “Endure their situation a little more.” “May turn out better than we expect” can mean to

	<p>“hang in there and enslavement could potentially become better” Jacobs shows a lot of passiveness in the grandmother's persona.</p>
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This potent passage represents the conflicting values and opinions both Linda and her grandmother has when it comes to what true motherhood is. Linda plans to hide, hoping Dr. Flint will sell her children to Mrs. Sands. Linda is packing when her grandma enters and berates Linda for worrying about her and leaving her children. Linda feels her first obligation as a mom is to free her babies from slavery, even with such significant risk. On the other hand, her grandmother views motherhood as lessening the cruelty of slavery as much as one can without taking risks to escape. Linda's grandmother expects Linda to "Bear a little longer." In the secondary source, "Motherhood as Resistance," The author talks about how Linda's grandmother believes slavery was done by the "will of god," They can do nothing about it or, instead, face detrimental consequences. Linda's grandmother feared Linda acted like a child would, reckless and carefree. She accuses Linda of "Adboning" her children when it comes to Linda going in and out of the homes instead of just "standing" with her kids and "suffering" with them. Linda, however, feels the opposite. Jacobs shows that motherhood is a very empowering part of Linda's life, and her determination to obtain freedom for her children reminds us of such. In addition, it shows her the underlying strengths she acquired her whole life. Linda's external and internal conflict on what true motherhood is is heightened with this conversation between them; however, she realizes she must make her own motherly decision regarding her children and what is best for them since they have no one to advocate for them.

Three Discussion Questions

(I actually came up with four)

1. What might have happened if Linda was not patient and began outright fighting her children's battles?
2. Does Linda's children fully understand Linda's role as both the mother and father?
3. Was her grandmother entirely wrong in her way of thinking about what true motherhood is?
4. What kind of experience did her grandmother and her grandmother's mom have when it came to being enslaved?

Reflection Paper

This reflection paper will go through my thoughts, feelings, opinions, and questions about “The Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl,” close reading I performed, as well as the secondary source of “Motherhood as Resistance.” I was drawn to the passages I presented in the Ps&Qs because I was drawn to the motherhood and family aspects throughout enslavement. I have always dreamed of being a mother one day, and I believe motherhood is a powerful and inspiring role to have in life. Unfortunately, motherhood can be deemed unimportant or undermined.

Throughout the story, however, Linda proves those notions to be false. I wanted to understand how motherhood and enslavement intertwined because that is never mentioned in today’s society. Womanhood and motherhood are fundamental aspects of many black women’s lives. Throughout my close readings of the motherhood theme presented, I learned more about motherly instincts and that moms essentially want to do anything for their children and will not stop until they do so. I found that highly inspirational as I also learned that even moms could play the father role and be the “protector” and the “nurturer.”

Furthermore, the close readings I have performed have made me more knowledgeable about how mothers were treated during slavery and how they prospered through. Slavery is considered one of the darkest times in America where many African American men and women were viciously beaten and dehumanized. Over time, however, the history of African American mothers became lost and was never really taught in school or talked about in society. These close readings gave me an intimate experience of what it is like to be a mother while being enslaved. It has made me grateful to be a free african american now that has the

free will to become a mother if I so desire and not be beaten or my kids are punished and treated terribly.

Moreover, I was able to become more attentive to detail. I have always been detail-oriented, but being in this class has allowed me the opportunity to close read and look for more beyond the words being presented. In the past, I have doubted my literary abilities for a while, and this class has helped me realize how essential reading and comprehending those close readings are necessary for me to become a better writer overall. My black ancestors inspire me, but more so the mothers who had a lot to lose but still decided to keep pushing through.

In addition, the secondary source of “Motherhood as resistance” incorporates a lot of background and detail on what motherhood looked like while enslaved. I found the secondary source very helpful in analyzing the main text in more detail. This secondary source focuses on Linda’s many different relationships, which include her relationships with her Grandmother, Ellen, her son, and Dr. Flint.

Ultimately, what caught my eye about this source was the author talking about her grandmother and how she and Linda both had different views on what was best for her children and slavery. Her grandma claimed slavery was “god given” and supposed to happen and that Linda should sit and do nothing for the sake of her and her children. Linda, however, did not want to sit on the sidelines and not stand up for her children. She saw more in them and even more in herself, and she did not want slavery to take that away from her. Linda struggles internally and externally when trying to figure out what to do for what is best. The

secondary source ultimately says Linda must decide what is best for her and her children and less about what her grandmother thinks.

Overall, the secondary source explains the text in more detail, which I sincerely appreciated. In addition, I love that the secondary source aligns with the theme I have been focusing on throughout this Midterm: motherhood.

Furthermore, throughout my Ps&Qs, I was always curious about Linda's grandmother and her thought process. One question that I believe would require further research is "Was her grandmother entirely wrong in her way of thinking about what true motherhood consists of?" and "What other themes exist within the theme of motherhood?" I would need to find a literary context to answer that question, but I can also answer it in a theoretical context. That answer may not exist and can only be theorized. If I were to turn this into a final paper, I would research more themes that can be found within motherhood. I would write about it in depth and find connections to "Incidents." I would also explore more into Linda's grandmother and try to find out what kind of life she had growing up as a slave girl. Then, compare and contrast her and Linda's experiences and note why they most likely have differentiating views. Those are the main pieces I find missing that I am inquisitive about researching more.

To conclude, I enjoyed doing the Ps&Qs and reading closely into scholarly material. Harriet Jacobs has been my favorite person we have learned about this semester so far. I have found it very inspirational to read and learn about her work in depth. We need to talk about slavery and its detrimental effects on African Americans. You are never too old to learn more, and I am glad I took this class to learn more about my ancestors' creative and determined

will. Linda is a fantastic mother and father figure from whom I have gained much inspiration. I will continue to explore more about Harriet Jacobs and her stories, which have become very inspiring. It is essential to educate everyone about the true horrors of slavery and what African Americans went through.