

CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl allows Harriet Jacobs, speaking through her narrator, to reveal her reasons for making public her personal story of enslavement, degradation, and sexual exploitation. Although originally ignored by critics, who often dismissed Jacobs' story as a fictionalized account of slavery, today it is heralded as the first book-length narrative by an ex-slave that reveals the unique brutalities inflicted on enslaved women.

Linda Brent — the narrator — is a slave born in North Carolina in the early 1800s. At the age of 12, her mistress dies, and Linda is sold to the five-year-old daughter of her mistress' sister. Because Linda's new owner is only 5 years old, her new owner in practice is the little girl's father, Dr. Flint. Obsessed with Linda, Dr. Flint relentlessly pursues her. To avoid Dr. Flint taking physical and sexual control over her, Linda is forced to make some drastic decisions.

Feeling it was the lesser of two evils, Linda has two children with a white lawyer named Mr. Sands. Dr. Flint feels betrayed by this, but instead of punishing her directly, he uses Linda's children to manipulate her.

Knowing Dr. Flint's obsession with her will never stop, Linda escapes with the help of her grandmother. Linda spends the next 7 years hiding in her grandmother's attic, watching her children visit their grandmother and worrying about being caught.

While in hiding, Linda learns that Mr. Sands has been elected to Congress. Linda writes Mr. Sands, begging him to take care of her children. Mr. Sands takes the kids with him to Washington. Shortly after her children leave North Carolina, Linda escapes to New York.

Linda works odd jobs, trying to support herself as a fugitive slave. She briefly reunites with her children, but has to move to Boston to escape capture.

Over the next several years, Linda continues to work and visit her children, but she continually has to dodge Dr. Flint, who never gives up his search.

Finally Linda receives a letter from her grandmother announcing Dr. Flint's death. Shortly thereafter, a lifelong friend — Mrs. Bruce — arranges to buy Linda for \$300 and gives her her freedom.

Free at last, Linda continues to live with Mrs. Bruce and her family and recalls that, despite all the pain she has endured, she has the comforting memories of her grandmother, who helped her survive her harrowing ordeal.

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Written by: Harriet Jacobs

Type of Work: novel

Genres: narrative

First Published: 1861

Setting: 1813-1849; North Carolina and New York

Main Characters: Linda Brent; Aunt Martha; William; Dr. Flint; Mrs. Flint; Uncle Benjamin; Mr. Sands; The First Mrs. Bruce; The Second Mrs. Bruce

Major Thematic Topics: economics of slavery; the quest for freedom; pain and suffering (physical and emotional); self-definition; self-assertion; community support; family loyalty (generally lacking in slave narratives by men); writing as a means of freedom, self-expression, and resistance

Motifs: literacy

Major Symbols: writing

The three most important aspects of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

- Harriet Jacobs was one of the few ex-slaves to write his or her own slave narrative. She was a heroic woman and a loving and fiercely protective mother. She was a writer and activist who fought for the rights of all women.
- Key themes include the economics of slavery; the quest for freedom; pain and suffering (physical and emotional); self-definition; self-assertion; community support and writing as a means of freedom, self-expression, and resistance.
- A significant extended metaphor is the issue of literacy. Literacy is a metaphor for freedom, because slaves who learned to read and write were often the ones who ran away.