

Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs Study Guide

**Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs
by Mary E. Lyons**

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Plot Summary

Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs is a fictional biography by Mary E. Lyons. In this novel, Mary Lyons has taken her research into the true life story of Harriet Jacobs and told it through a set of fictional letters she imagines Harriet Jacobs might have written during her days as a slave and later as a fugitive slave. Harriet writes letters to those who have touched her life and then left it, either through death or escape to freedom. Letters from a Slave Girl is a touching true story of life in slavery from a woman's point of view, a narrative that has often been overlooked in history.

Harriet is eleven when she begins writing letters to her mother. The letters begin as Harriet's first owner, Margaret Horniblow, has died. Harriet hopes that Margaret will free her in her will because of a promise Margaret once made to Harriet's own mother on her death bed. However, Harriet is disappointed to learn that Margaret has left her to her three year old niece, Mary Matilda. This means that Harriet will have to go live with Mary Matilda's family, including her cruel father, Dr. Norcom.

In letters to her father, Harriet describes life at the Norcom house, how hard the work can be and how cruel Dr. Norcom's wife often is toward Harriet. At the same time, Harriet worries about her brother John. John has never accepted his slavery well and he grows angrier and angrier each day he is forced to serve Dr. Norcom's son, James Jr. At the same time, Harriet has become aware of an uncomfortable interest Dr. Norcom has begun to take in her. As Dr. Norcom's attentions become more and more insistent, Harriet turns to a kind white man who has been a friend of her grandmother's for many years. Harriet gives herself to this kinder man, Samuel Sawyer, in the hopes that it will dissuade Dr. Norcom from his interest in her. With advent of a pregnancy, Harriet does win a temporary reprieve from Dr. Norcom's attentions.

After the birth of her first child, Harriet goes to live with her grandmother because of Mrs. Norcom's outrage at her pregnancy. Harriet lives there for many years, even after the birth of a second child. However, Dr. Norcom is growing impatient and tells Harriet that either she move into a cottage he has had built for her or he will send her to live on his son's plantation and sell her children. Harriet chooses the plantation, but decides to run away rather than allow Dr. Norcom to sell her children. Harriet runs to a friend and hides in her home for some weeks, then is moved to several other places until finally ending up in a tiny garret cut above the store room in her grandmother's home. Dr. Norcom, frustrated with his inability to find Harriet, arrests her brother, aunt, and children. Harriet refuses to expose her hiding place and Dr. Norcom runs short of money, finally selling John and the children to Sawyer, unaware he has just played into Harriet's hands.

Harriet lives in the garret for seven years, watching her children grow up in the yard below her. After a time, Harriet begins sending letters to Dr. Norcom, convincing him that she is living in New York. With each passing year Harriet feels safer and safer, but still cannot expose herself for fear of hurting her free grandmother or uncle. Harriet lives



each day hoping Samuel Sawyer will free her children, but instead he takes their daughter and gives her to a cousin in New York as a servant.

Harriet has the chance to escape on a ship going north, but she passes it up due to her grandmother's fear. However, when a nosy neighbor spots her in the store room of her grandmother's house, Harriet is forced to flee. Harriet arrives in Philadelphia and quickly makes her way to New York to reunite with her daughter. Over time, Harriet and her children are reunited for a brief time. Over the next fifty years, Harriet devotes herself to helping fugitive slaves and educating former slaves. Harriet also publishes an autobiography that is the first of its kind to address the sexual abuse that often impacted female slaves.



Part 1: 1825-1833

Part 1: 1825-1833 Summary

This novel is a fictionalized story of the true life of Harriet Ann Jacobs, a young woman born into slavery in 1813 who became a fugitive and eventually gained her freedom in 1852.

Mama. In letters written to her mother in 1825, Harriet begins by discussing her owner, Margaret Horniblow. Margaret has fallen ill in July of that year and Harriet fears that she will soon die. Harriet recalls that Margaret, who grew up with Harriet's mother, promised to treat Harriet well. Harriet hopes this means she will give Harriet her freedom when she dies. However, after Margaret's death, Harriet learns that Margaret has not given her her freedom, but has given her to three year old Mary Matilda, Margaret's niece by her sister, Maria Horniblow Norcom. Harriet soon learns that she will have to go live with the Norcom's at their house in town. The work at the Norcom house is hard, but Harriet takes solace in the fact that her brother John is also there and her grandmother is a short distance away.

Daddy. Harriet begins writing to her father, Daniel Jacobs a few months after his death. Harriet expresses concern for her brother, John, because he has never taken well to being ordered around and has been fighting with his owner's grandson, young James Norcom. A short time after Margaret's death, Margaret's mother Elizabeth dies. Elizabeth owns Harriet's grandmother, Molly Horniblow, and her uncle Mark as well as John. Elizabeth gives Margaret her freedom in her will, but Dr. Norcom refuses to honor this and decides to sell Molly and Mark, then buy John outright. Dr. Norcom had wanted to avoid embarrassment by selling Molly privately, but she refuses to allow this. Molly is purchased by Elizabeth's sister, Miss Hannah, for twenty dollars. Mark is also bought by Hannah for four hundred dollars.

Mama. Harriet goes to her first dance after convincing her grandmother to allow her to go. At the dance, Harriet meets a young free man named R. At the same time, however, Dr. Norcom has taken a frightening interest in Harriet. At first Harriet does not understand his intentions, but soon comes to understand them too well. Harriet tries to keep this from her grandmother, afraid of how she will react. Gran has only recently been given her freedom and been allowed to buy Mark. Harriet does not want to place all this at risk. At the same time, Harriet continues to see R at dances and around town. When R tells Harriet he wants to buy her freedom and marry her, Harriet is excited, but later learns that Dr. Norcom has outright refused to allow her to marry.

Dr. Norcom comes up with this idea that he will move Mary Matilda into his bedroom so that Harriet will have to sleep there too. However, Mrs. Norcom puts an end to this idea. Dr. Norcom will not stop. Dr. Norcom has decided to build Harriet a cottage out in the woods where Harriet will live. Harriet finally tells her grandmother and she tells Harriet to go to Samuel Sawyer, a white man who has always been kind to the family, to ask for



help. Mr. Sawyer tells Harriet that he would like her to become his lover. Harriet figures that if she lies with Mr. Sawyer, Dr. Norcom will not want her anymore, so she agrees. A few months later, Harriet tells Dr. Norcom she is pregnant and he backs off of her as she had hoped. However, Harriet's grandmother becomes angry with her and throws her out of her house.

R. Harriet begins to write to R who has gone to Savannah where he heard there was land to be had. Harriet tells him about her baby, a boy she names Joseph after an uncle who was born early at only four pounds. Harriet has moved in with her grandmother because Mrs. Norcom is embarrassed by her situation and does not want to have her around anymore. In August of 1831 there is a slave uprising that causes a great deal of tension in Edenton with slave patrols going out nearly every night, searching houses and looking for members of the revolt. Gran's house is searched, but all they find are some poems a friend sent to Harriet. After the hanging of Nat Turner things begin to settle down. The following year, Harriet gives birth to a baby girl, also Samuel Sawyer's child, who is christened in the white church because the black church was destroyed after the slave revolt.

Part 1: 1825-1833 Analysis

In this first section of the book, the reader learns a great deal about Harriet Ann Jacobs. Harriet is only eleven when the letters begin. The initial letters are optimistic, full of grammatical and spelling errors that slowly disappear as the years pass and Harriet teaches herself more and more about reading and writing. Harriet describes her first owner, a kind woman who grew up with her mother and promised her childhood friend that Harriet would have a good, easy life. This woman taught Harriet to read and from there allowed Harriet to teach herself to write. This was an unusual thing in Harriet's time when it was often against the law for slaves to learn to read and write because the white slave holders worried educated blacks would be harder to control.

Harriet learned her first lesson in the unfairness of life when Margaret failed to free her in her will, but instead gave her to a three year old child, in essence handing her over to the ownership of a cruel, sadistic doctor. Dr. Norcom allows his slaves to be worked too hard and then takes a sexual interest in Harriet. Harriet manages to escape his attempts to force himself on her by taking up with another white man she finds kinder. Harriet has two children with this other man, making the unusual move of living with her grandmother as though she were free because her owners do not want the disgrace of her and her children in their home. The reader suspects, however, that this will not last long.

History comes into the book as Harriet describes the slave revolt, known by history as the Nat Turner Revolt. This was a real revolt that happened closely to the way in which Harriet describes it in her letters to R. At the same time, many of the aspects of Harriet's life, such as being passed on from one owner to the next as she was or being sold in town like a horse as her grandmother was is also a snapshot of true history.



Part 2: 1835-1842

Part 2: 1835-1842 Summary

Uncle Joseph. Harriet begins writing to her Uncle Joseph in 1835 at the age of twenty-one two years after the birth of her daughter. Joseph is Molly Horniblow's son who ran away three times from his owner before finally disappearing to places unknown. Harriet begins her letter to him by describing Dr. Norcom's proposition to Harriet. Either Harriet move into the cottage Dr. Norcom has had built for her and he gives freedom to her children, or Harriet becomes the property of Dr. Norcom's son, James, who is about to be married and set up housekeeping at Auburn Plantation, and her children prepare to be sold. Harriet chooses the latter, still determined to stay out of Dr. Norcom's bed.

The work at Auburn is tough, but Harriet works hard. The children remain with her grandmother, Joseph because he was ill and Louisa because the plantation's wildlife proves dangerous for such a small child. Harriet has decided to run away from Auburn in order to protect her children. Harriet hopes that when she is gone, Dr. Norcom will place her children up for sale so that Samuel Sawyer can buy them. When Harriet first leaves, she stays in the house of a good friend who hides her for a few days. Harriet sees a flyer that Dr. Norcom puts out for her offering three hundred dollars for her return. When the slave patrols get too close, Harriet goes to hide in the home of Mrs. Martha Blount, a kind white woman who has agreed to hide her in secret. Harriet stays there for two months. During that time, Dr. Norcom has John, Harriet's children, and her aunt Betty arrested. Harriet wants to turn herself in to save them, but everyone talks her out of it. Betty is later released and Mr. Sawyer tricks the doctor into selling him John and the children. After a while, friends sneak Harriet out of the house due to the nosiness of another maid, and place her in a garret Uncle Mark built over Gran's storeroom.

Uncle Stephen. In the fall of 1835, Harriet begins writing to Aunt Betty's husband, a sailor who disappeared and is presumed a runaway. Harriet complains about the space where she is now hiding, a small space that is close to the roof, causing it to be unbearably hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. However, Harriet can hear her children playing in the piazza below her and her uncle has created a small space behind his bed through which he and her grandmother can speak to her sometimes. Dr. Norcom continues to search for her and Harriet sees a newspaper clipping of an advertisement Dr. Norcom has placed offering a one hundred dollar reward for her recapture.

Harriet continues to hope that Mr. Sawyer will free her children. While Mr. Sawyer shows no interest in placing the children into service, he does not seem eager to release them either. Mr. Sawyer puts John to work, first on his farm and later in his home. In 1836-37 a cholera and smallpox epidemic spreads through Edenton. Harriet becomes desperately ill and nearly dies but for the medical support of her brother John. Gran also becomes ill, but eventually recovers. In late 1837, Mr. Sawyer is elected to



the United States Congress and goes to Washington, D.C. with John. A short time later, Harriet learns that Mr. Sawyer is to get married.

John. Harriet begins to write to her brother John in October of 1838 after learning that he disappeared while in New York with Mr. Sawyer and his new bride. Gran is darkly depressed over her dwindling family, but a neighbor reminds her that John is free and in a place Gran knows about, not a slave to some unknown family in an unknown place. This reminds Harriet to count her own blessings as well. In August of the following year, Gran receives a letter from John informing them that he plans to travel on a whaling boat for three years to earn three hundred dollars. Gran is again worried for his safety. At the same time, the family learns that Mr. Sawyer's wife has given birth to a girl. About the same time, someone tells her about Mr. Sawyer's children with Harriet. Mrs. Sawyer plans to take seven year old Louisa to Chicago and then to New York to be a servant to one of Mr. Sawyer's cousins who will see to her education. Harriet comes out of her hiding place for the first time in several years to say goodbye to her daughter and to promise she will one day find her again. It is months before Harriet learns where her daughter is, but is happy to learn she has made it to New York safely.

In February of 1839 Harriet's Aunt Betty dies of a stroke. Mrs. Norcom wants to bury her in the white cemetery so she might lie at her feet, but Gran refuses and buries her in the black cemetery beside her other children. Gran is deeply saddened by this additional loss to the family.

Aunt Betty. Harriet begins writing to Aunt Betty in June of 1842. Seven years has passed since Harriet first came to hide in the tiny garret above Gran's storeroom. The roof is getting thin and needs to be repaired, but Mark cannot repair it with Harriet inside. Peter comes and tells Harriet that he has a ship that she might get passage on to the north. Harriet decides to do it, but Gran begs her not to out of fear for her safety. Instead they give the ticket to Sarah, the runaway daughter of one of Gran's friends. For days the ship is stuck in the harbor due to a storm. As the storm passes, Harriet is in the storeroom with Gran when a nosy girl from down the street catches sight of her. Gran hurriedly arranges for Harriet's passage on the ship.

Harriet is happy to be out in the open again, but her legs swell if she walks too much due to the long years of inactivity. Harriet writes to her grandmother and promises she will find Louisa and send for Joseph, hoping one day that they will be able to live together as a real family.

Part 2: 1835-1842 Analysis

In this section of the novel, Harriet has been living with her grandmother for more than five years when Dr. Norcom suddenly decides he wants her back. Dr. Norcom tells Harriet he will free her children if she comes to live in the cottage he has built for her, essentially becoming his mistress. Harriet refuses, however, determined to never be forced into Dr. Norcom's bed. However, this refusal places Harriet's children in danger. Harriet hatches a plan in which Dr. Norcom will lose interest in the children and agree to



sell them to Mr. Sawyer, their father. The plan works, but it leaves Harriet locked in a tiny cell for more than seven years, watching her children grow from a distance, never able to tell them where she is or how much she loves them.

In the end, Harriet is able to escape to the north, but she has paid a terrible toll to get there. Harriet has had to leave her son and watch her daughter be torn from her family. Harriet has given up seven years of her life.



Part 3: 1842-1897

Part 3: 1842-1897 Summary

Harriet: The Rest of Her Story. 1842-1852. Harriet arrives safely in Philadelphia and quickly makes her way to New York where she discovers that her daughter has been made a waiting maid to Mr. Sawyer's cousin and has not received the promised education. Harriet promises to take her daughter back, but cannot at first. Instead, Harriet becomes a nurse maid to a family called Willis. In 1844, Harriet moves to Boston and is able to bring Louisa there as well. Soon Harriet, Joseph, John, and Louisa are all reunited and move into a small home together. However, the small family is broken when Harriet goes to Europe with the Willis' and Joseph, unhappy with his apprentice job in a print shop, goes off on a whaling boat.

In 1849, John sends Louisa to New York to get an education. John and Harriet follow closely behind and open a reading room for blacks in a shop above Frederick Douglass' newspaper offices that eventually fails. At about the same time, Mary Matilda marries a ne'er do well named Daniel Messmore who has a falling out with the Norcom family and finds he needs the money the sale of Harriet could bring him. With the passing of the Fugitive Slave Laws in 1850, Harriet begins to fear for her safety. Once again working for the Willis', Mrs. Willis buys Harriet's freedom from the Messmore's in 1852.

1853-1870. In the 1850s Harriet lost both her grandmother and Uncle Mark in the stretch of five years. In 1857 John became disgusted with the government in America and took Joseph to Australia. Harriet would never see her son again. Throughout the 1850s Harriet began writing anonymous letters about slavery that were published in various papers. In 1858, Harriet finished an autobiography entitled *Linda: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Harriet would self-publish the book, the first contemporary book to discuss the sexual aspects of slavery from the point of view of a woman. Throughout the Civil War and during its aftermath, Harriet and her daughter would travel the country helping slaves and educating free blacks.

1870-1897. In 1870 Harriet ran a boarding house. Eight years later she would move to Washington to be with her daughter. Harriet sold her grandmother's house in 1892. Five years later, Harriet herself would pass away.

Part 3: 1842-1897 Analysis

The last of the novel is a summary of Harriet's life after finally reaching the northern states in 1842. Harriet will briefly have her family together for a time, but it will not last. Harriet is still a slave even though she lives in the north and with the passing of the Fugitive Slave Laws that allow slavers to pick slaves off the streets in the north and return them to slavery in the south, Harriet is frightened to even walk down the streets.

However, she meets kind people and Harriet finally gets her freedom when the second Mrs. Willis buys her freedom from Mary Matilda.

The real Harriet Jacobs was a brave woman who used her voice to make people stand up and listen to the truths about slavery. In the years before the Civil War, Harriet used her crude education to publish letters and an autobiography that told stories no one was telling back then, the story of slavery through the eyes of a female slave. Most of the narratives back then were told by men, not women, and the sexual aspect of slavery was never really acknowledged in public. Harriet did a brave thing making this public and opened the door for other stories. This story is an important one, even today, for anyone who can identify with any aspect of Harriet's difficult life.



Characters

Harriet Ann Jacobs

Harriet Ann Jacobs is a real person who lived from 1813-1897. Harriet was born into slavery because both her parents were born slaves. Harriet's story is told in fictional form in this novel through letters the writer imagines she might have written as a child and young woman. In these letters, Harriet talks about her life, first as the slave of a kind woman called Margaret Horniblow who was a childhood companion of her mother's. Harriet hopes that Margaret will offer her her freedom in death, but Margaret leaves Harriet's ownership to her young niece, Mary Matilda. This forces Harriet to have to live with the Norcom family headed by Dr. Norcom, a dark, sadistic man who quickly takes a sexual interest in the light skinned Harriet.

Harriet has two children with another white man, Samuel Sawyer, who she finds kinder and gentler than Dr. Norcom. This causes some tension between Harriet and the Norcom family until final Dr. Norcom threatens to sell her children. Harriet runs away and remains in hiding for seven years before finally escaping to the north where she is eventually reunited with her two children.

The author tells the end of Harriet's story, explaining to the reader that Harriet was a real person who was one of the first female slaves to speak publicly about the sexual aspects of slavery that was often overlooked by the storytellers since many of them were men.

Molly 'Gran' Horniblow

Molly Horniblow is Harriet's grandmother. Molly is a baker who is allowed to keep her own money by her master, Elizabeth Horniblower. However, since Molly saves every penny to buy her remaining children out of slavery, Mark and Betty, Mrs. Elizabeth borrows three hundred dollars from her taking away the bulk of her fortune. Later, when Elizabeth dies, she gives Molly her freedom but her son-in-law, Dr. Norcom, refuses to give it to her. Dr. Norcom sells Molly and she is purchased by Elizabeth's sister, Hannah, who eventually gives Molly her freedom.

When Harriet has her two children with Mr. Sawyer, she goes to live with Molly because the Norcom's are embarrassed and outraged by Harriet's pregnancies. In time Harriet is forced back into slavery for the Norcom's, but she runs away and comes to live over Molly's storeroom where she watches Molly raise her two children in the shadow of the nightly slave patrols. Molly is a strong, good woman who lives a unique life among slaves in North Carolina in that she has lots of freedoms and eventually becomes a free woman. Unfortunately, Molly is only able to free one of her children, Mark, and watches as her other children die before her and her grandchildren run to freedom.



Margaret Horniblow

Margaret Horniblow is Harriet's first owner. Margaret was a child with Harriet's mother and they grew up together because Molly was a slave belonging to Margaret's mother after the death of her father. When Harriet's mother died, Margaret promised to treat her daughter with kindness. Margaret fulfills this promise by teaching Harriet to read and giving her the tools to teach herself to write. However, when Margaret dies she does not free Harriet as she had hoped, but leaves her to her niece, Mary Matilda.

Dr. James Norcom

Dr. Norcom is married to Margaret Horniblow's sister, Maria. Due to the fact that Harriet is left to Mary Matilda, Dr. Norcom's daughter, in Margaret's will, Harriet essentially becomes Dr. Norcom's property. Dr. Norcom is a mean, sadistic man who becomes sexually attracted to Harriet. Dr. Norcom begins pestering Harriet, reminding her that she is his property and must do anything he tells her. This frightens Harriet and she resolves to never share a bed with Dr. Norcom, eventually hiding for seven years in a tiny garret in order to defy him.

Samuel Sawyer

Samuel Sawyer is a kind white man who lives near Molly Horniblow and is friends with the family. Harriet turns to him for help when Dr. Norcom becomes insistent in his attentions toward Harriet. Sawyer expresses a desire to make Harriet his lover and eventually she consents, deciding it is better to be with someone kind, such as Mr. Sawyer, than with Dr. Norcom. Sawyer fathers two children with Harriet and later promises to free the children. However, although Sawyer buys the children, he never frees them, but instead presses Louisa, the youngest, into service.

John S. Jacobs

John is Harriet's brother. John has never adjusted well to the idea of being someone's servant, therefore he is filled with a great deal of anger and is often getting in trouble. John and Harriet spend a great deal of their childhood talking about escape one day. When Mr. Sawyer buys John, he is happier because Mr. Sawyer is a kind master, but he is still a master. When Mr. Sawyer takes John to New York, John runs away and will not see Harriet again for several years, not until she too makes her way to New York.

Betty

Betty is Harriet's aunt, Molly's daughter. Betty is a kind woman who works for Mrs. Norcom. Betty is married to a man who is owned by a ship's captain, therefore he travels a great deal. Betty has struggled to have children with her husband, but Mrs.



Norcom works her so hard that Betty miscarries every child. After twenty years of marriage, Betty's husband runs away while his ship is in a northern port. A short time later Betty dies of a stroke.

Mark

Mark is Molly's son. Mark is a kind, gentle man who also belonged to Elizabeth Horniblow. When Molly gets her freedom from Hannah, she is allowed to buy Mark but must place him as collateral for some debts. Mark works on a ship for a time to earn his money and eventually his freedom. Mark lives with his mother until his death five years after her death, making his living as a barber. Mark is the one who built the garret above his mother's storeroom where Harriet would spend seven cramped years of her life.

R

R is a free man, a carpenter, whom Harriet meets at a dance in Edenton. Harriet only refers to him as R in fear that using his real name might cause him trouble should Norcom find her letters. R is a kind young man who falls in love with Harriet and dreams of buying her freedom so that they might be married. However, Dr. Norcom refuses to give Harriet her freedom or to allow her to marry this young man. As a result, Harriet encourages R to go to Savannah to look into some land there and not look back, hoping he can find happiness with a free woman whose children will not be considered slaves.

Joseph and Louisa

Joseph is Harriet's oldest child, a son born as a result of an affair with Samuel Sawyer. Louisa is Harriet's second child, also Samuel Sawyer's. When Harriet learns that Dr. Norcom wants to sell her children away from her, Harriet runs away in hopes that Dr. Norcom will allow Samuel Sawyer to buy the children. This happens, but Samuel Sawyer does not free the children right away. In fact, Sawyer never frees the children, but he takes Louisa to New York where he promises she will get an education, but instead she is pressed into service as a waiting maid. Harriet eventually reunites with her children in the north.



Objects/Places

Letter Book

Harriet's letter book is a grouping of letters she has written to dead and missing loved ones on the back and sides of book pages.

Crackers

Molly Horniblow makes money selling homemade crackers from her home.

Herbs

John learns how to treat illnesses with herbs while he belongs to the Norcom family.

Garret

Harriet lives for seven years in a tiny garret cut out above her grandmother's storeroom in order to keep from being caught by the slave patrols and returned to bondage with the Norcom family.

Jail

Harriet's brother, children, and aunt are put in jail in Edenton shortly after she runs away in an attempt to force her to give herself up. The trick does not work and they are all eventually released.

Cottage

Dr. Norcom has a cottage built for the sole purpose of hiding Harriet there so that he might make her his mistress.

Ship

Harriet eventually escapes Edenton aboard a ship on which she must pay passage to a captain sympathetic to the slave's plight.



Linda: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Her

Linda: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself is an autobiography Harriet had anonymously published about her life in slavery. It is the first contemporary book of its kind to tackle the issues of sex in slavery.

Edenton, North Carolina

Edenton, North Carolina is where Harriet lives as a slave.

New York

Harriet ends up in New York shortly after leaving Edenton because she knows her daughter is there living with a cousin of Samuel Sawyer's.

Boston

Harriet lives for a time in 1844-45 in Boston with her children and brother, John.

Australia

Disgusted by the American government's handling of slavery, John S. Jordan takes Harriet's son, Joseph, and travels to Australia in 1857. John would eventually come back to America, but Harriet would never see her son again.



Themes

Slavery

This novel is a fictionalized story of a real woman who was born into slavery in 1813. For this reason, slavery becomes a central theme to the novel as the author uses real history to bring her story to life. Slavery was legal in the United States for more than a hundred years, coming to the original colonies with the first settlers. By 1825, when this novel opens, slavery had begun to be abolished in the northern states of the country, but was still growing in the southern states and into the new territories being added to the country.

Harriet is eleven in 1825, a child left orphaned with the death of her mother and by realities of slavery from her father. Harriet is lucky, however, in the fact that she has a grandmother who has unique freedoms to spend time with her grandchildren and an owner who has taught her how to read and given her the freedom to learn to write. This luck soon runs out when Harriet learns that her owner has left her to the Norcom family in her will, forcing Harriet to move into the home of cruel doctor James Norcom.

The realities of slavery come to descend on Harriet when she is refused the right to marry a free carpenter and then discovers that Dr. Norcom has every intention of making her his mistress. Harriet fights this reality, however, having children with another white man and running away to protect those same children. Harriet makes a fool of Dr. Norcom and turns her story into one of triumph rather than one of submission.

Family

Family is deeply important to Harriet and her grandmother. Harriet grows up with the knowledge that her grandmother has been saving for years to buy the freedom of all her children, who have dwindled from five to two. Harriet can see in her grandmother a woman who is not content to allow her children to be sold off to every corner of the south, leaving her without knowing where they are or if they are safe. This develops in Harriet a strong sense of family.

When Harriet has two children of her own, she vows to do all she can to protect them. Harriet is afraid of them being sold away from her, taken somewhere she cannot be near them. For this reason, Harriet runs away and watches as the children's father plays a trick on her owner and buys the children out from under her. Harriet only wants freedom for her children, but that is a dream that will be many years in coming. In the end, Harriet is reunited with her children and lives to see them free. It is this that motivates Harriet and therefore makes family a theme of the novel.

Freedom

For slaves in the south, freedom has always been a dream that some of them will never attain. Harriet's father told her once that she has always been free and she takes this to heart, reminding herself of it again and again after she finds herself in hiding for seven years in an attempt to keep her children safe.

Freedom is a dream that Harriet's father and brother both held closely all their lives. John is filled with anger at his forced servitude in the Norcom family, often dreaming with Harriet how they will one day run away. When John is bought by Mr. Sawyer he finds slavery bearable, but it is still in bondage against his will. Finally John, like two of his uncles before him, runs away to freedom. While his family worries for him and his safety, they are happy he has found something some of them will never know. For this reason freedom is a theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

There are two distinct points of view in this novel. This first point of view is the first person point of view. The first two parts of the novel are written in a letter format, therefore they are written in the first person point of view through the eyes of the main character, Harriet Jacobs. The third part of the novel tells of Harriet's later years of life, beginning when she finally escapes the south and ending with her death. These years are told in a simple third person point of view that includes something of the authorial voice.

The author has fictionalized the true story of Harriet Jacobs by telling the story of her early life through letters the author imagines she might have written. These letters are to friends and family of Harriet's who have either died or run away to freedom in the north. Although fictional, these stories tell of Harriet's life and escape from slavery, a true story. In the third part of the book the author finishes Harriet's story in a brief summary that is told in the third person point of view that includes the authorial voice. This final part of the book is simply a telling of a true story, not a narration.

Setting

The novel begins in Edenton, North Carolina where Harriet Jacobs was born and spent the first twenty-eight years of her life. North Carolina was a slave state at the time in which Harriet lived there, making it legal for white landowners to keep slaves. While most of the fictional section of the book takes place in North Carolina, the final part of the book takes place in the north where Harriet fled to gain her freedom from slavery.

The setting of the novel is important for several reasons. The first reason is that North Carolina was a slave state during the time period in which this novel was set, giving a realistic setting to the story of Harriet's years in slavery. Another reason this setting is important is because it is the real birth place of Harriet Jacobs, providing a realistic touch to her fictional story. Finally, the setting of the novel is important because the author touches on a few historical facts of the time period, including the Nat Turner Revolt that took place in North Carolina in 1831, creating a period of fear and madness in the Edenton area for the better part of a year.

Language and Meaning

The novel begins with grammatical and spelling errors, as well as a dialect that some readers might find unfamiliar. The author begins her novel in this way in order to show how Harriet might really have written her letters with her limited education and the dialect she would have learned both from family and friends as well as the educated whites in whose homes she was a servant. Later, as Harriet becomes more proficient in



her writing, the grammatical and spelling errors begin to disappear and the country slang begins to lessen.

The author uses the language of the novel to bring a realistic picture of life as a North Carolina slave to the reader. The author has done a great deal of research into the grammatical, spelling, and dialect oddities to which Harriet might have been exposed and writes using these, showing the reader what she thinks is a good example of what Harriet's writing might really have been like. In this way, the author has remained true to her character, even in the language she uses in her novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into three sections. The first two sections tell of Harriet's young life in slavery up to the moment of her escape into the north. These sections are told in letter format in letters that Harriet might have written to friends and loved ones that she lost to death or escape throughout her childhood and never intended to show to anyone. In this way, these letters are almost like a journal Harriet might have kept of her daily activities. The third section of the book is a summary of the final fifty years of Harriet's life. At the end of the book the author has also included pictures of Edenton, an explanation of the language used in the first half of the book, and an index explaining some of the odd terms used in the novel.

The novel contains one plot, that of Harriet Jacobs' life. This plot follows Harriet from the age of eleven until she finally escapes to the north at the age of twenty-eight. The story of Harriet's life is fictionalized, but based on a true story that suggests great courage and strength of character. The plot comes to a satisfying ending and is then expanded upon in the third section of the novel when the author gives a summary of the final fifty years of Harriet's life.



Quotes

"Most Slave children dont get any learning, she say, now dont waste it." Part 1, pg. 3

"I know Miss Margaret has remember her childhood friend and the promise she make the night you die. Besides, she her self taught me to read these words from the Bible: Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself." Part 1, pg. 10

"I miss you, Daddy, even though I am mad with you for leaving us. I guess that make me your daughter, since you always were mad as hops bout every little thing." Part 1, pg. 16

"I been letting myself dream that Missus leave Gran free." Part 1, pg. 23

"All summer long, Missus watch the Docter and the Docter watch me. He try one thing and then another. I would laugh if I were not so afraid." Part 1, pg. 33

"Gran sit silent when I tell her everything bout the Docter and Samuel and how I choose him becaus it seem like a way to be free. And she put her hand on my head and say, Poor child, poor child. I think Gran took pity on me, Mama, but I dont think she forgive me." Part 1, pg. 43

"Three times you escaped, Uncle Joseph. Send me some of your daring! I need it to slip down these creaky stairs and climb out into the dark night." Part 2, pg. 60

"For a runaway Slave, walking around town feels like walking round naked." Part 2, pg. 71

"And in that time, only two things left in my life's cup: the pain in my body and the sound of my children growing up." Part 2, pg. 84

"Maria Norcom wanted her buried in the White folks' burying ground so her Slave would lie at her feet when the Missus die." Part 2, pg. 104

"For the first time ever in my life, I see the sun rising on freedom." Part 2, pg. 113

"Only forty-eight years old, Harriet had experienced a lifetime of suffering. And with her book, she had made a unique contribution to the antislavery cause. Incidents revealed the sexual aspects of slavery, which were thought to be too vulgar for delicate ears." Part 3, pg. 123



Topics for Discussion

Who is Harriet Ann Jacobs? What is significant about her life? Why does she write letters to people who are dead or who have left her life? What does Harriet talk about in these letters? Who is Margaret? Why is her death significant in the first section of the novel? What has she taught Harriet to do? Why is this unusual?

Who is Dr. Norcom? Why has Harriet come to live with the Norcoms? What unusual attention does Dr. Norcom pay to Harriet during her time with the family? What does Harriet think of this attention? How does she respond to it? Why is Harriet afraid to tell her grandmother about this situation? What is she afraid Molly will do?

Who is Samuel Sawyer? How does he respond to Harriet's request that he help her in her situation with Dr. Norcom? Why does Harriet agree to submit to Sawyer when she refused to do so with Norcom? What is the difference between these two men? Why does Harriet end up having two children with Sawyer? What does she hope Sawyer will be able to do for their futures?

Why does Harriet run away from Auburn plantation? Where does she go? What does Harriet hope the result of her escape will be? Is this the result? What happens as Harriet hides in Edenton? How does Dr. Norcom react to Harriet's escape? How does Sawyer? What does Dr. Norcom do to Harriet's children, brother, and aunt? For what reason? How does Harriet react?

Who is Molly Horniblow? How does she achieve freedom? Why does she remain in Edenton? Why does Molly hide Harriet for seven years? Is Molly not afraid of the consequences? What would happen to Molly if anyone learned the truth? Does anyone ever learn the truth? Why does Molly mourn her son and grandson who have escaped to freedom? What does this freedom mean to Molly?

Who is John? Why does Harriet mention on multiple occasions that she is concerned for him? What does Harriet fear will happen to him? For what reason? What does John learn while working for Dr. Norcom? How does he use this to benefit his friends and family? Who buys John from the Norcoms? For what reason? How does John eventually end up in New York? What does he do there? What later becomes of him?

How does Harriet finally arrive in New York? What does she do when she arrives there? What are the Slave Fugitive Laws of 1850? What do these laws mean to Harriet? Why does Harriet live in fear until 1852? Who claims to still have ownership of Harriet? For what reason? How does Harriet finally win her freedom?