

The Hardships of Slaves and Mill Workers

By Stephanie Gamboa

Harriet Jacobs's (1813-1897) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* narrates the nonfictional firsthand account of a female slave during the early 1800s. Jacobs experience as a Southern African American slave puts many thoughts into perspective throughout her book. The fictional story of *Life in the Iron Mills* takes place in 1861 where the daily activities of a Northern mill worker is intricately examined. Both stories engage the topics of race, gender, class, and the different mentalities in the Southern and Northern regions. *Incidents* and *Life in the Iron Mills* illustrate the inequalities that citizens faced in the early years of the United States. Jacobs's reveals the gender and race problems present in America while *Life in the Iron Mills* touches bases on the class differences in America. These two firsthand accounts provide an insightful comprehension of the social and economic struggles faced in America. It also allows for a comparison to the different struggles presented to African Americans when compared to lower class whites in the 19th century. These two pieces ultimately reveal that not all was perfect in American society and that much reform needed to be made to truly provide its citizens with equality.

The predominant issue in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, are the many injustices masters inflicted upon African American females as in comparison to male African American slaves. The main character Jacobs mentions "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."¹ On top of the strenuous workload a slave was expected to perform, African American women were subjected to sexual harassment both physical and mental. From an early age, African American women experienced this harassment because they were viewed as property and therefore could be used for whatever purpose the master deemed appropriate. The unlimited power and control over female African Americans made it acceptable for masters to do as they pleased which put women in a vulnerable position to be viewed as sexual objects. Jacobs describes her experience and those of other African American females concisely when she states, "She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse."²

Jacobs faced constant sexual harassment from her master because she was what one may consider beautiful having a lighter complexion derived from her Anglo-Saxon heritage.³ Dr. Flint demonstrated much interest in Jacobs, following her everywhere she went and constantly reminding her that she had to submit to his every will. To further worsen the matter the mistress was extremely jealous and hateful towards Jacobs. The mistress would use every opportunity at hand to make Jacobs's life more difficult.⁴ Instead of expressing compassion towards the degradations women faced, the mistresses showed hatred towards African American females.

Slaves were subjected to psychological abuse, being separated from their children and spouses as well. Jacobs's master inflicted this form of manipulation upon her. Dr. Flint constantly threatened Jacobs with separating her from her children if she did not comply with his will. Jacobs declared that, "Dr. Flint loved money, but he loved power more."⁵ Dr. Flint did not physically beat Jacobs however he did deny her basic human rights. There were many instances where white friends of the family tried to purchase Jacobs; however,

Dr. Flint enjoyed the mental sufferings and mental manipulation he could impose upon his slaves. Dr. Flint's primary desire was to control Jacobs which is why he did not sell his slaves.

Reading and writing, the most basic forms of human rights, were striped from African American slaves to reinforce this control. The slaves were to be kept in ignorance and denied the right to read; it was against the law to teach a slave how to read. Slaves who taught each other how to read were subjected to imprisonment and a whipping.⁶ Fortunately Jacobs was literate however her master did not allow for the other slaves around her to gain knowledge. The reason for which Jacobs knew how to read was because she was taught as a young child by her family but if it would have been up to her master she would have never been able to learn. It was the master's interest to keep their slaves in ignorance to be able to exert complete dominance in their lives.

The psychological abuse was so extreme that Jacobs remarked on her trip to Europe as a nanny: "the people I saw around me were, many of them, among the poorest," but then she states, "The most destitute of these peasant was a thousand fold better off than the most pampered American slave."⁷ The reason for this remark is that even though these people worked from day in and out, they still enjoyed the basic rights of having their own family unit and having control over what they chose to do. The poor people of Europe did not have to worry if their daughter or son was going to be taken from them, as did most slave parents. The European poor people were protected under the law, unlike slaves who could be whipped to death by their masters. These people lived in poverty but not in fear. Jacobs being a former slave who escaped into freedom provides great observations with the contrasts among slaves and the poor in Europe. This comparison demonstrates that life in America was not better than life in Europe. It is ironic that life in America offered immigrants better opportunities primarily because they were the right skin complexion while life in Europe offered African Americans better life prospects.

The main issue present in *Life in the Iron Mills* is the class difference in the United States between the poor and the rich. There was a wide gap based on income and wealth during the Industrial Revolution; people were either economically disadvantaged or wealthy. The main character is Wolf, a poor Irish immigrant working at an iron mill factory. Wolfe lived in a small cellar and his meals typically consisted of a boiled potato despite working hard every day.⁸

The lower class worked hard trying to achieve the American dream, however, they were not upwardly mobile. Much like the slaves in the south, climbing the social ladder was extremely difficult and nearly impossible for immigrants in the north. The barrier in this case was not a race issue but a class issue. The North was more tolerant of race. *Incidents* mentions how slaves tried to reach the north in hopes of not being discriminated on account of their race. The factory owners of the North were not focused on race but on getting working people to toil in their factories, white or black. In the same manner, slaves in the south, factory workers found themselves in a similar situation performing strenuous work for a meager salary which would not allow them to climb the social ladder. The reason behind this is that both slave owners and factory owners had one thing in common: their ultimate interest in money. Rebecca Harding Davis acknowledges this interest when Mitchell, the man in charge, proclaims "money has spoken" establishing that money has ultimate control over everything.⁹

In both *Life in the Iron Mills* and *Incidents* the vision for a better life is a common theme and people were willing to risk their life in the pursuit of a promising future. Wolfe from *Life in the Iron Mills* is sent to jail for robbing a check. Wolfe, despite being poor, has one thing and only one thing he treasures dearly—his freedom. The prospect of a better life motivated Wolfe. Jail kills this prospect and Wolfe foresees a life full of misery, therefore, he decides to commit suicide as a means of regaining his freedom.¹⁰

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* also hold freedom in high regard. Jacobs's uncle Benjamin decides to escape slavery by running away and gets imprisoned. Benjamin has the same mentality as Wolfe: a life without freedom is not worth pursuing. However, Benjamin is able to escape prison and find the freedom he always yearned for in the North. Benjamin was willing to die for his freedom because the life of a slave was full of constant degradation and toil but, as Benjamin states, "we don't die but once" therefore he either wanted freedom or would die trying.¹¹ The high value these characters place on freedom are reflected on the very principle American life is based on. Patrick Henry once declared "give me death or give me liberty" during the revolutionary area of the United States a principle by which both characters held in high regards.

Both slaves and the iron mill workers were oppressed and advancing in their situations provided to be difficult. Slaves could not advance because they found themselves subject to racial factors and poverty. Northern factory workers could not advance because the social class gap kept them in poverty. One of the iron mill workers stated, "I do not think. I wash my hands of all social problems, slavery, caste, white or black."¹² This iron mill worker felt that he was oppressed just as slaves were because of the inability to improve his social status. The average mill worker and slave were both overworked physically and confined to work in their tasks. The mill worker however did not realize that they were in a far better position than slaves and the poor working class in Europe.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* both share many similarities. Both slaves and mill workers found themselves in poverty, yearning for an opportunity to improve their social standing, oppressed, and holding freedom in high regard. *Incidents* focused on race issues and gender issues while *Life in the Iron Mills* focused on class issues. Both groups were oppressed and in poverty with a small to nearly impossible opportunity to improve their living conditions. The Southern slaves however faced a more oppressive situation because among class issues they also faced race issues making success much more difficult.

Notes

¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (New York: Dovers, 2001), 66.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁸ Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* (New York: Feminist Press), 17.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 21.

¹² Ibid., 35.