

Themes

The Corrupting Power of Slavery

Jacobs takes great pains to prove that there can be no “good” slave masters. She argues that slavery destroys the morality of slave holders, almost without exception. Slave holders such as Dr. Flint become inhumane monsters. With no legal checks on their behavior, they inflict every conceivable kind of torture on their servants. Most slave masters view slaves as little more than animals or objects, never acknowledging their humanity. But even “kindly” slave holders, such as Mr. Sands, show themselves capable of betraying their slaves when it is convenient or profitable. Mr. Sands promises to free his slave children and may even intend to do so at first. However, in the slave system, such good intentions are easily forgotten. If a slave owner such as Mr. Sands encounters financial problems, he will likely be tempted to sell his own children to get himself out of trouble. Thus, slavery distorts even the most basic emotional instinct: the love of a parent for a child.

Slaves also suffer from the influence of the slave system on their moral development. Linda does not condemn slaves for illegal or immoral acts such as theft or adultery, saying that they usually have no choice but to behave this way. However, she also points out that slaves have no reason to develop a strong ethical sense, as they are given no ownership of themselves or final control over their actions. This is not their fault, but the fault of the system that dehumanizes them. Slaves are not evil like their masters, but important parts of their personalities are left undeveloped.

Domesticity As Paradise and Prison

At the end of *Incidents*, Linda states that she is still waiting to have her greatest dream fulfilled—that of creating a real home for herself and her children. The desire for a comfortable and safe home runs throughout this book, reflecting the cult of domesticity that would have been familiar to Jacobs’s mostly white female readers in the nineteenth century. During Jacobs’s time, women were relegated to the domestic sphere and expected to find all of their fulfillment in caring for their homes and children. Women were considered to be housewives by their very natures, unfit for any other kind of life. As a black woman excluded from this value system, unable even to live with her children, Linda’s longing for a home is understandable.

Jacobs does not always present the domestic sphere as an uncomplicated good. Aunt Martha, the book's representative of domesticity and the only black woman Linda knows who has a real home, is both a positive and a negative character. She is caring and stable, the backbone of her family and a paragon of domestic virtue. Her tidy home is a refuge and a lifeline for Linda from the time her own mother dies. But at times in which Linda needs encouragement in her quest for freedom and independence, Aunt Martha and her house become a discouraging, even confining force. Placing her children's needs above her own, Linda remains a virtual captive in Aunt Martha's home until she is permanently crippled. Hence, home and family are valuable, but they must be balanced with personal freedom. Otherwise, they may overwhelm a woman's individuality.

The Psychological Abuses of Slavery

Most slave narratives emphasize the physical brutality and deprivation that slaves were forced to endure, presenting gory descriptions of beatings and lynchings to shock the reader. Jacobs does not ignore such issues, but her focus on slaves' mental and spiritual anguish makes an important contribution to the genre. As a slave with a relatively "easy" life, Linda does not have to endure constant beatings and hard physical labor. However, she and many of the other slaves around her suffer greatly from being denied basic human rights and legal protection. Men and women are not permitted to marry whomever they choose—they often are not allowed to marry at all. Women are frequently forced to sleep with the masters they despise. Worst of all, families are torn apart, with children sold to a place far away from their parents. Thus, even slaves who are not beaten or starved are stripped of their humanity. When Linda states that she would rather be a desperately poor English farm laborer than a "pampered" slave, she underscores the point that slavery's mental cruelty is every bit as devastating as its physical abuses.