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The Female Slave Experience

Throughout the history of slavery and slave narratives, the point of view usually comes from a male. For example, Frederick Douglass' *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick* in which he tells the audience about his own unique experience as a male slave and he even touches on some of the things that female slaves endured as well. Slavery was brutal for both males and females, and at times they experienced some of the same hardships such as hard labor and whippings. But I believe that there is evidence that proves that female slaves had to go through a little bit more than what males did. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, and *Clotel* by William Wells Brown, I believe that these authors illustrate from a fictional and autobiography view, how the slave experience for women was more difficult than the slave experience for men due to the ways that they were oppressed. These things include how being sexually harassed can impact one's psyche or the obsession with the female slave body, and dealing with the consequences of resentment from their master's wife or mistress.

During slavery within the United States, female slaves had to endure being sexually harassed or exploited by their masters. Historically speaking, this was especially the case for females who were thought of as being extraordinarily beautiful. Harriet Jacobs detailed how she was a victim of such actions in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Within the autobiography, Jacobs discussed how she was sexually harassed by her master named Dr. Flint,

who was in pursuit of trying to take away her innocence, which negatively impacted her psyche. An example of this is first seen when Jacobs writes, "He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master" (Jacobs 231). Slaves were often thought of as objects or animals, and in this quote, Jacobs seems to illuminate with her language and tone, that the real animal is Dr. Flint, thus highlighting some of the horrors of being a female slave. Yet Jacobs says that Dr. Flint is not even an animal, he is just a wicked monster. Dr. Flint's quest for Jacobs to submit to him impacted her state of mind so badly that it clouded her conscious with revenge and a sort of desperation to want to change her situation. This type of desperation can lead an individual down a road that they will regret and feel ashamed of, which was the case for Jacobs herself. To potentially get out of her situation, Jacobs did the unthinkable by having an intimate sexual relationship with her lover Mr. Sands, and becoming pregnant with his children. The reader can see this when Jacobs says, "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me" (Jacobs 234). This was a ploy at freedom for Jacobs, yet she was consumed with trying to settle the score with Dr. Flint by ironically using her body. Dr. Flint was trying to sexually exploit Jacobs for his own depraved desires, so Jacobs decided that she would instead exploit herself. By doing this, Jacobs was ashamed of her actions obviously, but she lost the very thing that she was trying to protect, and that her grandmother was trying to protect too.

In slave narratives, male and female slaves make sacrifices to better their life, but someone taking away their own sexual purity or innocence away is something unique to Jacobs

herself, and perhaps just only female slaves could have related to. Ann Taves talks about the ideas of purity and shame in her article from *Church History* that looks at such things in Jacobs' writing within *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Within the article Taves says that "the fear at the heart of the feeling of shame is rejection with contempt and thus isolation" (Taves 63). What Jacobs did went against everything that her grandmother had taught her and could change the way in which her family looked at her because they were very prideful in the fact that Jacobs was someone with good character. Although, female slaves were seen as depraved and out of control animals to men at the time.

Jacobs was supposed to have that aura of purity and ambivalence that was often used to describe women, but particularly white women in the 19th century. Readers must remember that Jacobs' was writing to a northern white female audience, and that these ideas of purity and explicitly explaining the abuse that she went through, could have been written in this way to cater to that audience. The plan of exploiting her own body instead of letting Dr. Flint have his way with her so she could possibly escape from him, ultimately did not work out the way that she wanted it to. Sexually exploiting the body for yourself or others is revealed to not be the answer, but it helps explain why there was some sort of fascination with the body of a female slave, especially of those who have both black and white heritage.

During the 19th century, slaves that had both black and white heritage were called mullata. Jacobs was of mixed race and so was Brown's main character Clotel in his novel *Clotel*. The character Clotel was definitely thought of as being extraordinarily beautiful and within the novel, there is sort of an obsessiveness with her body and her qualities when she is being sold at a slave auction. This can be seen when Brown writes, "The appearance of Clotel on the auction block created a deep sensation amongst the crowd. There she stood, with a complexion as white

as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers” (Brown 274). These white men were in awe of Clotel, and seemed as though the people in the crowd could not wait to purchase her for their own wicked desires. But why would the purchasers see Clotel in the light of a depraved female slave when she looks like them?

Katie Frye talks about the fixation that white men had upon albino female slaves in her article for *The Mississippi Quarterly*. Within this article Frye says, “The kinship between Clotel and albinism becomes all the more indicative of racial difference. That is, although the association of whiteness with impurity in this scene would seem to reverse racial stereotypes, in fact it only serves to reinforce the image of black women as sexually available” (Frye). Some white slave owners were so fixated upon females who came from both a white and black background because they were obviously close to their standard of perceived whiteness in terms of looks, but since they had this black heritage within them, they were sexually available. Since Clotel has black heritage, white men or slave owners felt that it was okay to look at her as a sexual object and spectacle, rather than a human. This goes back to the idea in the 19th century that all white women were supposedly pure and virtuous, while black female slaves were depraved. The sales pitch for Clotel when the auctioneer is describing all of the qualities that she has and the reaction from the crowd solidifies how she is a spectacle. The reader can see this when within the work every time the auctioneer mentions a new quality such as intelligence or sexual purity, the price goes up and up, until she is eventually purchased by Horatio Green.

Already having to deal with the sexual advances from their masters, female slaves also had to endure the hatred or jealousy that would arise from the master’s wife. This hatred or resentment for their fellow African American sister comes from their husband’s pursuit of often a sexual relationship or romantic relationship with their female slaves. In *Incidents in the*

Life of a Slave Girl, Mrs. Flint embodies the jealous wife archetype when the husband is in pursuit of a primarily sexual relationship with one of the female slaves. This jealousy is first seen in the autobiography when Jacobs writes, “there was considerable gossip in the neighborhood about our affairs, to which the open-mouthed jealousy of Mrs. Flint contributed not a little” (Jacobs 233). People within the neighborhood were beginning to hear rumors about Dr. Flint’s behavior with female slaves such as Jacobs herself. It would seem like as a woman, Mrs. Flint would want to help a victim of such mental and verbal abuse, yet she does nothing because she is angry and jealous. Although the possibility of Mrs. Flint stepping in may not be very realistic due to the time period of course, but that does not solve why Mrs. Flint is jealous of these slaves, particularly Jacobs, when her hatred should be directed toward her vile husband Dr. Flint.

It is revealed in the narrative, that Jacobs tried to appeal to Mrs. Flint for protection against Dr. Flint, but this cry for help was obviously not heard due to resentment. Seda Peksen discusses the relationship between white women and female slaves within the narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and many others in his critical essay written in 2013. Peksen explains in his essay that the reason that the mistresses or wives of slave owners are so jealous and resentful of female slaves was because they are trying to make up for their deprivation of power in their relationships with their husbands (Peksen). Jacobs’ personal experience with this in her narrative when she had to deal with Mrs. Flint, helps to explain why Mrs. Flint did not vent to Dr. Flint and why her hatred for Jacobs grew so much, that she did not even want to see Jacobs in her presence. The reader can see this when Jacobs says, “I had not returned to my master’s house since the birth of my child. The old man raved to have me thus removed from his immediate power; but his wife vowed, by all that was good and great, she would kill me if I

came back and he did not doubt her word” (239). Mrs. Flint is trying to make herself believe that Jacobs is the reason that Dr. Flint is acting like a monster, which results in her not having to acknowledge the actions of her husband. It is possible that Mrs. Flint’s resentment of Jacobs was just a product of them living in the 19th century, yet Brown’s character Clotel faced a similar experience with her lover’s wife in *Clotel*, but this wife had some actual pull to really impact Clotel’s experience as a female slave.

The relationship that Horatio Green and Clotel had within the novel was that of a legitimate romance until he married a woman named Gertrude to enhance his political career, rather than an owner of the likes of Dr. Flint in *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl*. Unlike Mrs. Flint, Gertrude actually exercises some power to take care of the jealousy that she had against Clotel. This can be seen in the novel when Brown writes:

To this proposition he at first turned a deaf ear; but when he saw that his wife was about to return to her father’s roof, he consented to leave the matter in the hands of his father-in-law. The result was, that Clotel was immediately sold to the slave trader, Walker, who, a few years previous, had taken her mother and sister to the far South. (281)

Green did not want to sell either Clotel or his daughter Mary, but when Gertrude demanded that they be sold, with also threatening to leave the confines of his house, Green had no choice. This power play by Gertrude would have been uncommon for the time, but the power relation between white women and their supposed subordinates in this situation was a factor.

In his critical essay, Peksen talks about how “Power relations are ingrained in white women’s minds by the patriarchal ideology and those women play an active part in the oppression of the subordinate female (Peksen). This would make it seem that Clotel was

competition for the affection of Green, and Gertrude wanted to eliminate the competition by any means necessary. There could not be another who was more beautiful than Gertrude and that could conceivably take Green from her. The reader can see signs of the potential jealousy and competition when Brown writes, “Gertrude, though inferior in beauty, was yet pretty contrast to her rival. Her light hair fell in silken ringlets down her shoulders, her blue eyes were gentle though inexpressive, and her healthy cheeks were like opening rosebuds” (Brown 280-281). Readers can see just from how both Clotel and Gertrude were described as basically opposites, that Gertrude did not stand a chance against Clotel if the competition was based primarily on one’s looks. So, the hatred and resentment that built up within this particular wife, did not materialize into threats, but into actual action taking place to cure this jealousy or insecurity upon the female slave or lover in Clotel.

This wife did not only just oppress Clotel by selling her out of spite, but also by separating her from her daughter. This is seen when Brown writes, “Mrs. Green resolved to take his child under her own roof for a servant. Mary was, therefore, put to the meanest work that could be found, and although only ten years of age, she was compelled to perform labour, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been thought too hard for one much older” (Brown 281). Gertrude or Mrs. Green did all of this out of spite and to embarrass her husband. Her actions as a character could possibly put her a notch away from being a monster such as Dr. Flint in Jacobs’ autobiography. Having a child trying to perform work duties that a grown adult could barely do, undoubtedly indicates that one is close to being a monster, because only a monster would do such a thing. There may have been circumstances where male slaves had to endure resentment or jealousy from their male masters or perhaps their wives, but it was very unlikely

that they had to deal with situations such as the one mentioned right above. Although, readers must remember that Green gave Gertrude this level of power, unlike Dr. Flint.

The evaluation of the slave experience for females in regards to how the psyche of female slaves was negatively impacted from sexual harassment or just how there was this obsession with their body, along with the oppression that they had to endure from the wives of their slave masters due to their jealousy helps readers understand that female slaves experienced things that most male slaves would not even fathom with having to deal with. Jacobs' as the female author of her autobiography obviously gives readers a female point of view, but one is writing as a victim as sorts. Then you have Brown who is writing about the female slave experience from a male's point of view, thus is probably the reason you see his character Clotel try to assimilate with people and use her skin tone as an advantage. These evaluations are important because of how women are treated today in the present, regardless of race. Why is it at times that people still see women as sexualized objects, rather than human beings?

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