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Eng. 615
Final Essay (Rewrite)
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Black Light, White Darkness

the pronoun just didn't seem to work

Eventually someone like ^{Harriett Jacobs} ~~her~~ has to tell her story--over twenty years a slave, then escape, and hiding for seven more years before safe passage to New York. ~~Harriet Jacobs~~, ^U using the pseudonym "Linda Brent" in her autobiography Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ^{Harriet Jacobs} spotlights the ignorance that is the progenitor of slavery. Jacobs' life makes her eminently qualified to assert "Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations" (xiv). However, Incidents accomplishes a great deal more than just recounting acts of cruelty and disgrace. Through her perceptions of her oppressors, Jacobs becomes a beacon, illuminating white faces with dark souls.

This is good

And rooted at the bottom of these unenlightened souls is the inherent belief that they are superior to those they oppress. According to Professor William Sumner Jenkins, University of North Carolina, "The inferiority of the Negro was almost universally accepted in the South by all groups of pro-slavery theorists as a great primary truth" (252). Jenkins goes on to illustrate that the idea of "white supremacy" germinated among seemingly intelligent, educated minds and so-called "high society." As two examples he offers Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright [physician] who believed "that the Negro race, beyond all others, was so perfectly fitted for a state of slavery" (251) and Dr. Thomas Cooper [professor] who wrote "I do not say that blacks are a distinct race: but I have not the slightest doubt of their being an inferior variety of the human

species and not capable of the same improvement as the whites" (252). But Jacobs, having experienced souls like these, observes "If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh from his bones. The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower" (49-50).

Unfortunately, however, the black race's inferior status did not exempt it from sexual favors, or, actually, demands. What Professor David Brion Davis, University of Mississippi, calls "the supposed taint of African blood, carrying with it the supposedly savage and undisciplined instincts of prehistoric man" (Owens 61) formed only a social barrier, as Harriet Jacobs learned both early and firsthand. She tells of Dr. Flint, the fictitious name she gives to the physician who is her master. [?] At ~~age~~ ¹⁵ fifteen, ~~it~~ is, as Jacobs relates, "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt" (26). However, nothing would prevent Dr. Flint, whose thoughts were dark and whose passion was cold, from imposing his will. Eventually, when he builds a separate cottage, supposedly to provide Jacobs with a home in which she would become a lady, she is able to see the light. Her response, made out of desperation, stops him dead in his tracks; rather than become his private concubine, Jacobs tells him "I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother" (57). For once, at least, such "tainted blood" mingled with its own kind, free from the purity of the superior white race.

good contrast

Am I reading this correctly?

Economics, too, made black skin attractive to white. As Professor James O. Breedon, Southern Methodist University, notes, "a number of concerned, perhaps enlightened, slaveholders and their allies expended much intellectual energy in search of the ideal in slave management. Although they stressed humanity and duty, the chief motivation behind their efforts was probably self-interest" (xvii). Typical of these "enlightened" slaveholders, asserts Breedon, is the anonymous practitioner who remarked "The care and management of his slaves forms an important branch of the planter's business. Well treated and cared for, and moderately worked, their natural increase becomes a source of great profit to the owner" (xvii).

Contrary, of course, were slaves like Harriet Jacobs, whose escape to freedom from the infamous Dr. Flint meant only a loss of property, translated into money:

\$300 Reward! Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years of age...She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States...\$150 will be given to whoever takes her in the state, and \$300 if taken out of the state and delivered to me, or lodged in jail (Jacobs 100).

Thus, to the slaveholder, whether benign or malignant, the Harriet Jacobses of the world were not people, only numbers in a carefully maintained ledger. At best, reasonable treatment of a fellow human being was a prudent business practice; at worst, unspeakable cruelty was merely man disciplining beast. And while "the economics of

slavery and the nature of the slave economy have long been discussed and debated," (Owens 71) according to Professor Stanley L. Engerman (University of Mississippi), one wonders how much time and thought are devoted to slave economics seen in an entirely different light:

The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be a chattel (Jacobs 5).

Jacobs' answer to cold economics is even colder reality. Besides Dr. Flint, whose oppression Jacobs felt personally, there are others, both anonymous and highly visible, whose attitudes reveal a darkness equally sinister. Jacobs, in saying "It was always the custom to have muster every year" (64) recounts a supposedly organized security inspection that, in fact, was a purge which "was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority...not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation" (65). On the other hand, Mississippi Senator Albert Brown, a man of great influence, who "could not be ignorant of many such facts..." (124) spoke out not in behalf of freeing black feet from white chains, but, rather..."he stood up in the Congress of the United States, and declared that slavery was 'a great moral, social, and political blessing; a blessing to the master, and a blessing to the slave!'" (125)

What, then, empowers one race to subjugate another? Is it intrinsically man, forever darkened by his failure in Eden? Or is it divine decree? One theory holds that "God had decreed slavery

Engerman
in Owens?

before it had actually come into existence: 'And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren'" [Genesis IX: 25] (Jenkins 201). Even according to the New Testament, "the Apostles taught submission of the slave to his master, and by so doing recognized the relation as being compatible with Christianity" (Jenkins 203). Thus, is the Golden Rule an exclusive country club? Certainly, we can understand... it is with understandable rage that Jacobs reviles the traveling clergyman who tours the plantation and then concludes that slaves do not want to be free:

What does he know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn to dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them (76).

Perhaps it, too, explains why Harriet Jacobs never formally joined any church. After all, she conjectured, "There are sinners enough in it already...If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad" (77).

And so she did. Devoting the rest of her life to nursing during the Civil War and helping freed slaves adjust to their new world, Jacobs proved herself to be a lamp of liberty, which, through Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, will shine forever. But to the oppressors who, with neither heart nor soul, kept a human race in bondage--rest in peace, gentlemen. You spent your entire lives out of the light; may darkness prevail where you sleep.

Works Cited

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[Jacobs], Linda Brent. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1973.

Jenkins, William Sumner. Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South. Gloucester: Peter Smith P, 1960.

Owens, Harry P., ed. Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery. Jackson: University of Mississippi P, 1976.

AI - I like the rewrite!

Good seeing you again - you added much to the class ~~to me~~.

Best to you in your endeavors. Keep in touch.

Dr. Hahn is teaching the Faulkner course in the fall; I saw him at ETS.

Paper - A
Course - A

The story is fine, although I thought maybe the mother would actually swear ("in little shit") - also what does Cory dream of attaining (besides mere escape?) - we care about characters more if they go for the dream/goal. \$