

Masking and Double-Voicedness in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: What Is Harriet Jacobs Hiding?

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* begins with a preface in which Harriet Jacobs recognizes that her narrative may be difficult for her readers to believe or understand, and is accompanied by an introduction from a white editor that affirms Jacobs is telling the truth. As modern readers, it is easy to read this as a recognition of the racial divide, but I posit that it is Jacobs recognizing that the sexual elements of her text are difficult for white readers to understand. Jacobs's implied readers are northern white females, and while generally writing for an abolitionist audience, Jacobs's text challenges broad understandings of the South. To insulate her readers from the graphic difficulties of slavery Jacobs does not always detail the full story of Linda Brent. This practice of presenting a sanitized narrative while still representing events truthfully is termed as 'masking,' 'double-voicedness,' or 'double-meaning.' Novian Whitsitt defines masking as "a technique of double meaning that allows the storyteller to make accessible a hidden message to those readers attuned to the secretive signs embedded within the story" (73). Masking takes on a specific function in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs is presenting a sanitized version of her life for white readers, while also representing a life experience that black readers will recognize and understand. Harriet Jacobs utilizes double-meaning throughout her narrative to distance herself, as the author, and Linda Brent, as the character, from scenes of sexual abuse. The text is seemingly for a white audience, while the use of double-meaning creates a specific narrative for black audiences that can understand Jacobs's text in a different way than white audiences. I will be expanding on the arguments of Novian Whitsitt in "Reading Between the Lines: The Black Cultural Tradition of Masking in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" and Anne Dalton in "The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” while highlighting where their analysis can go further. Both Whitsitt and Dalton argue that Jacobs utilizes masking and double-voicedness to hide evidence of Brent’s relationship with Dr. Flint, I find that there is potential evidence for this reading, but it is not as clear as the authors argue. I focus their analysis of masking on the ways Jacobs protected her white readers while appealing to black audiences through representations of the same scenes.

Masking takes on two roles in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It provides white readers with a sanitized version of events while also enabling them to feel as though they have gained an understanding of the conditions faced by individuals in slavery. The second role of masking is to provide black readers with a recognition of the events they underwent while enslaved. Jacobs is signifying that these individuals are not alone, and she is able to relate to their experiences through the character of Linda Brent. To simplify the definition of masking, it is a double message to specific readers (Whitsitt 73). By utilizing masking/double-voicedness Jacobs can support herself through her work while also writing to a more specific black audience. Jacobs writes to white and black audiences in different ways. She must write in a censored, ‘delicate’ manner so as not to alienate white audiences, but also graphically enough to persuade white audiences of the validity of her texts (Dalton 39). However, Jacobs uses double voice to encourage black readers to “break the shackles imposed on them by white Americans” (Powell Wolfe 520). Jacobs’s text recognizes the improved conditions of former slaves in the North but also recognizes that it is not the imagined utopia. Thus, while supporting white audiences in their attempts to achieve abolition, Jacobs is showing black readers that they should break free of the constraints placed on them by white individuals. This fight for freedom from

white masters is seen throughout *Incidents*, specifically in Linda Brent's desire to escape Dr. Flint's sexual abuse and her involvement with Mr. Sands.

Before discussing examples of masking in *Incidents* it is important to differentiate between Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent. While Jacobs is the author of *Incidents* and Brent is a pseudonym that she utilized to protect her anonymity, the two are not the same. Brent is a character, and as such her experiences cannot be read as direct representations of Jacobs's own experiences. The question is then, why did Jacobs use the pseudonym of Brent? What is she protecting by hiding identities? Whitsitt posits that the pseudonym is used as a way to distance Jacobs from sexual assault that she may have been subject to at the hands of Dr. Flint. Whitsitt writes that "a speculative reading of Brent's being sexually assaulted by Flint is not only plausible but arguably more credible (73). Whitsitt posits that Brent was sexually assaulted by Dr. Flint, but Jacobs hides this fact through masking. Her refusal to tell the truth about encounters with Dr. Flint is representative of accounts of abused women (Whitsitt 75). Jacobs writes about Brent's sexual experiences through the lens of shame, "it pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may" (Jacobs 46). This sense of shame comes before Jacobs introduces Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands, it is said in reference to Dr. Flint and her eventual relationship with Mr. Sands, which according to Whitsitt, leads the reader to believe there is a sexual interaction between Dr. Flint and Brent.

However, Jacobs does not completely isolate readers from the influence sexual assault played in the lives of slave women. She "exposed the institutionalized practice of sexual abuse early in the narrative so that her readers would, from the outset, understand the slave woman's position as a sexual as well as racial commodity" (Dalton 54). By introducing the practices of

sexual abuse early in the novel, readers become familiar with the impact it had on slave women. Thus, when Brent becomes involved with Mr. Sands, or discusses sexual abuse, it is not read as an affront to white values. However, through masking Jacobs attempts to conceal the events that occur in Brent's life, "even Jacobs's desire to conceal seems to further her effort to expose the sexual victimization" (Dalton 39). While not the same as outright concealing, Jacobs presents Brent as arguing on behalf of the women who have faced more clear-cut sexual abuse, "still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave should not be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 48). This creates a divide between reader and author, but due to the early introduction of sexual abuse, white readers would likely agree with this statement warning against the judging of slave women.

A reoccurring theme in *Incidents* is Brent's desire to remain pure, and while this is often read as an appeal to the cult of true womanhood, it can also be read as a desire to avoid being sexually assaulted by Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint represents the reality of sexual assault and its place in the institution of slavery; "for years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood" (Jacobs 46). Jacobs makes it clear that "Brent too aspired to reach the established standards for her sex, but the workings of slavery robbed her of sexual purity and domesticity" (Whitsitt 77). While Jacobs points to slavery as the destructive force that robs Brent of her sexual purity, this is a condition felt in the experiences of other female slaves (Whitsitt 84). Brent is described in the same terms as other slave women, "the influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world" (Jacobs 46). It is this premature knowing that is of particular interest in the connection between Linda Brent and Dr. Flint.

Throughout the narrative Dr. Flint's abuse towards Brent is told in a series of what appear to be sexually charged stolen moments. Jacobs describes Dr. Flint's verbal sexual harassment of Brent through imagery that implies he was able to molest her physically (Dalton 40). While physical abuse is never made clear, much of the abuse faced by Brent is through information whispered to her by Dr. Flint. Although this is horrifying, modern readers would generally not see it in the same light as physical abuse. However, "in parables and folklore, the ear has traditionally been one site of the virginal woman's molestation and impregnation" (Dalton 42). Jacobs highlights the connection between the ear and sexual assault when describing the cottage Dr. Flint builds for Brent, "I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me" (Jacobs 45). Jacobs is thus masking the risk of sexual assault, black readers would clearly understand her plight, while white readers would not necessarily understand the conditions Brent was facing. Jacobs, as Brent, repeatedly states that she cannot describe all she witnessed because of the audience's inability to accept the truth of her plight (Dalton 46). The audience being described is a white audience and to counter their disbelief Jacobs stresses Brent's desire to remain pure and her inability to do so in the face of slavery, "I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me" (Jacobs 46). Slavery, and the sexual assault associated with the institution, are what destroyed Brent's purity, not the choices she made as a slave.

Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands is often read in terms of achieving agency. A reading that is supported by Jacobs's text, "it seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (Jacobs 47). At first reading, this analysis makes sense, but it is necessary to

investigate Brent's decision to become involved with Mr. Sands in more detail. Whitsitt identifies Brent's choice to have sex with Mr. Sands as leading to the survival of her family (78). Following Brent's reasoning, if her children are not biologically Dr. Flint's he will have less reason to sell them, and if he does, they can be purchased by their supposed father. However, it is possible to further this analysis of Brent's decision and apply it to a narrative of sexual violence. In this reading, Brent's relationship with Mr. Sands is to avoid becoming pregnant by her molester, it removes some aspect of power from Dr. Flint (Dalton 52). In the text Jacobs masks information about Mr. Sands and his relationship with Brent to maintain the aspects of purity that Brent fights so vehemently attempts to protect (Dalton 53). The representation of the relationship between Mr. Sands and Brent must be carefully described so as to protect Brent from condemnation by norther readers. Despite this risk, Jacobs presents Brent as making an informed choice, "with all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made the headlong plunge" (Jacobs 47). In this passage Jacobs is highlighting Brent's recognition that her behavior can be read as inappropriate, while also showing readers the terrible conditions she was facing under Dr. Flint and the realization that sexual intimacy with Mr. Sands could save her family.

So, what does it mean for Jacobs to have utilized masking/double-voicedness in her text? It highlights the black tradition of masking information and compares it to the cult of true womanhood and its emphasis on feminine conventions (Whitsitt 81). In addition to this, masking leads to a palatable narrative; it allows for Jacobs to discuss institutionalized sexual violence without losing the respect of the reader (Whitsitt 86). However, masking complicates the distinction between Brent and Jacobs, "Jacobs's narrative is radical because she is able to speak through her imagery even while she portrays Brent as silence" (Dalton 43). Thus, it is easy for

readers to confuse the two, leading elements of the text to be applied to Jacobs's life without proper analysis. Masking plays an important role in the text, "much as Linda Brent could not, as a child, tell all to her grandmother, uncle, or brother, Jacobs emphasizes that she cannot tell all to her readers" (Dalton 52). Masking thus insulates the white reader from the true evils of slavery while providing recognition to black readers.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a challenging text to read for many different audiences. It engages with subjects of sexual assault and violence, in conditions where the women being abused are unable to protect themselves. Jacobs discusses these topics in a very frank way, but also employs masking and double-voicedness to isolate her audiences from the difficult nature of her subject matter. The primary audience being isolated is her white audience, while masking enables black audiences a deeper understanding of the text. I argue that Jacobs utilizes masking to show that Linda Brent was sexually assaulted by Dr. Flint and her relationship with Mr. Sands is a response to that event, an effort at self-protection. Jacobs's text is representative of the context in which it was written, but the way it engages with issues of sexual violence can be seen in modern conceptions of the problem.

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