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Intro to U.S. History to 1865
Jacobs Essay
Paper Option 2

Harriet Jacobs as a Storybook Heroine

In and through her creation of Linda Brent, who yokes her success story as a heroic slave mother to her confession as a woman who mourns that she is not a storybook heroine, Jacobs articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new kind of female hero.

– Jean Yellin (Jacobs, *xvi*)

In Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Life of a Slave Girl*, we see Harriet Jacobs portrayed by the character Linda Brent transform from a slave girl to a young mother, and finally to a free woman. Jean Yellin's above statement seems to suggest that Harriet Jacobs was using her narrative to improve her own personal image. However, one could argue that Yellin appears to be making conflicting statements by asserting that Jacobs mourned that she was not a storybook heroine. I agree with certain portions of Yellin's statement, yet I feel that she is making conflicting arguments about Jacobs mourning that she was not a storybook heroine. If one reads Yellin's statement and then proceeds to read Jacobs narrative with Yellin's statement in mind, her argument quickly deflates.

In the beginning of the novel, Linda is a depressed teenage girl, yet well treated slave. She obeys her master and she treats him with what little respect she can muster. When she has her first child, she prays for the death of both herself and her unnamed baby boy. (Jacobs, 62) Since the conditions that slaves had to endure were terrible, this is not a complete shock,

but it is a surprise that Yellin would label Linda as a heroine when she's praying for the death of her baby boy.

This is a very depressing point in Linda's life as she is witnessing other slaves being tormented and sold, mothers being torn apart from their children, and other instances of emotional and physical abuse. Linda gets separated from her children and as a result of this she begins to get a feeling of guilt and remorse for previously praying for their death. Her attempts to free her children, both from jail and from slavery can be interpreted as Jacobs transforming into the heroic slave mother that Yellin describes.

Linda's positive parenting attributes were starting to show when she refuses Dr. Flint's proposal of living together with her children and chooses to go to the plantation instead. She knew that if she opted to live in the cottage and be free with her children, her children would still be forced to work. She did not like the idea of continuing to be a piece of property of Dr. Flint, plus she "knew him so well that I was sure if he gave me free papers, they would be so managed as to have no legal value" (Jacobs, 84). Linda always has had a certain degree of power over Dr. Flint, which is evident when she tells him that she decided to go to the plantation. Dr. Flint assumed Linda would have chosen to live in the cottage with her children, yet when she decided against that, her decision put the doctor into one of his common rages. This could be seen as an empowering characteristic of Linda, as she does it numerous times throughout her life. This puts Dr. Flint in the situation of having to control himself from hurting Linda. It shows that although slaves were powerless under law, they could find power in their own ways.

Linda makes many bold attempts to assert her womanhood. One would be when she escaped from the plantation, after having been discouraged by her grandmother against doing so. Her grandmother tells Linda that “nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment” (Jacobs, 91). Linda’s children were an important part of her life at this time, so she understands her grandmother’s advice.

Another instance where Linda declares her womanhood is on the boat that is sailing to Boston. When the captain refuses to let Linda and her daughter sleep in a cabin below deck, Linda tries to bargain with the captain instead of just giving in. Her bargaining pays off, and she gets to travel in the cabin of the ship, a luxury for black people. (Jacobs, 181-182)

Linda is not the true storybook hero, but it seems that she never mourns about it. If all else, she would appear to be proud of the fact that she is *not* the true storybook hero. She led an extraordinary life that filled the hearts of many other slaves with hope and joy which is something that she would be proud of.