COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

What Slaves Are Taught To Think of The North

By Harriet Ann Jacobs
1861

Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897), who wrote under the pseudonym Linda Brendt, was an American slave who eventually escaped and became an abolitionist. "What Slaves are Taught to Think of the North" is a chapter from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, in which Jacobs provides a true account of her experience as a slave.

As you read, take notes on the structure of the excerpt and the author's purpose in writing this text.

"Harriet Ann Jacobs 1894" by Jean Fagan Yellin is in the public domain.

[1] Slaveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men; but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity.[1] I have spoken plain English. Pardon me. I cannot use a milder term. When they visit the north, and return home, they tell their slaves of the runaways they have seen, and describe them to be in the most deplorable[2] condition. A slaveholder once told me that he had seen a runaway friend of mine in New York, and that she besought[3] him to take her back to her master, for she was literally dying of starvation; that many days she had only one cold potato to eat, and at other times could get nothing at all. He said he refused to take her, because he knew her master would not thank him for bringing such a miserable wretch to his

1. **Veracity** ***(noun)*** conformity to facts; truthfulness
2. **Deplorable** ***(adjective)*** shockingly bad in quality
3. asked with urgency

house. He ended by saying to me, "This is the punishment she brought on herself for running away from a kind master."

This whole story was false. I afterwards staid[4] with that friend in New York, and found her in comfortable circumstances. She had never thought of such a thing as wishing to go back to slavery. Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worth while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom. It is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children. If those heathen[5] in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos,[6] they would think otherwise. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert[7] themselves to become men and women.

But while the Free States sustain a law which hurls fugitives[8] back into slavery, how can the slaves resolve to become men?[9] There are some who strive to protect wives and daughters from the insults of their masters; but those who have such sentiments[10] have had advantages above the general mass of slaves. They have been partially civilized and Christianized by favorable circumstances. Some are bold enough to utter[11] such sentiments to their masters. O, that there were more of them!

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It

4. "stayed"
5. **Heathen** ***(noun)*** a person who does not belong to a widely held religion or does not uphold the principles of said religion; someone lacking in moral principles
6. A person who follows Hinduism, which is a religion and culture based in South Asia.
7. **Exert** ***(verb)*** to make a physical or mental effort
8. **Fugitive** ***(noun)*** a person who has escaped from a place
9. The Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and of 1850 allowed for the capture and return of runaway slaves.
10. **Sentiment** ***(noun)*** an attitude toward a situation
11. **Utter** ***(verb)*** to speak aloud

is the ignorance in which white men compel[12] him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work.

[5] Southern gentlemen indulge[13] in the most contemptuous[14] expressions about the Yankees, while they, on their part, consent to do the vilest work for them, such as the ferocious[15] bloodhounds and the despised negro-hunters are employed to do at home. When southerners go to the north, they are proud to do them honor; but the northern man is not welcome south of Mason and Dixon's line, unless he suppresses[16] every thought and feeling at variance[17] with their "peculiar institution." Nor is it enough to be silent. The masters are not pleased, unless they obtain a greater degree of subservience[18] than that; and they are generally accommodated. Do they respect the northerner for this? I trow[19] not. Even the slaves despise "a northern man with southern principles;" and that is the class they generally see. When northerners go to the south to reside, they prove very apt scholars. They soon imbibe[20] the sentiments and disposition[21] of their neighbors, and generally go beyond their teachers. Of the two, they are proverbially[22] the hardest masters.

They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel[23] upon the heavenly Father, who "made of one blood all nations of men!"[24] And then who are Africans? Who can measure the

12. **Compel** ***(noun)*** to force or oblige someone to do something
13. **Indulge** ***(verb)*** to allow yourself to have or do something as a special pleasure, to become involved in
14. **Contemptuous** ***(adjective)*** behaving as though a person is worthless; hateful
15. **Ferocious** ***(adjective)*** violent or cruel
16. **Suppress** ***(verb)*** to subdue or put down; to keep from public knowledge
17. **Variance** ***(noun)*** the quality of being different
18. **Subservience** ***(noun)*** the act of obeying
19. **Trow** ***(verb)*** to think or believe
20. **Imbibe** ***(verb)*** to absorb certain ideas or knowledge
21. **Disposition** ***(noun)*** a person’s usual attitude or mood
22. **Proverbially** ***(adverb)*** well-known
23. **Libel** ***(noun)*** a false statement
24. Acts 17:26

amount of Anglo-Saxon[25] blood coursing[26] in the veins of American slaves?

I have spoken of the pains slaveholders take to give their slaves a bad opinion of the north; but, notwithstanding this, intelligent slaves are aware that they have many friends in the Free States. Even the most ignorant have some confused notions about it. They knew that I could read; and I was often asked if I had seen any thing in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them. Some believe that the abolitionists have already made them free, and that it is established by law, but that their masters prevent the law from going into effect. One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen of 'Merica that they were all slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarrelled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free.

That poor, ignorant woman thought that America was governed by a Queen, to whom the President was subordinate. I wish the President was subordinate to Queen Justice.

25. Anglo Saxon refers to a person whose ancestors were English, descended from the Germanic people who conquered Britain in the 5th century.
26. **Course** ***(verb)*** (referring to a liquid) to flow or move without obstruction

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes a central idea within the text?
    A. Slaves were purposefully manipulated by slaveholders to keep them enslaved.
    B. Southern slaveholders actually respected people living in the North, despite the lies and cultural differences.
    C. Education makes little positivie difference when living in extreme conditions (i.e. slavery).
    D. Harriet Ann Jacobs praises Northerners for their full support of keeping escaped slaves free.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worthwhile to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom." (Paragraph 2)
    B. "If those heathen in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos, they would think otherwise." (Paragraph 2)
    C. "When southerners go to the north, they are proud to do them honor...." (Paragraph 5)
    D. "...I was often asked if I had seen any thing in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them." (Paragraph 7)

3. What do the southern slave owners want slaves to think of the North?
    A. They want them to think the North does not care about freeing them.
    B. They want them to think the North will send them back to the slaveholders.
    C. They want them to think they will have even worse lives as freed people in the North than as slaves in the South.
    D. They want them to think they will not be welcome in the North.

4. Why does the author likely reference the Fugitive Slave Act in the text—how does this contribute to the central idea(s)?

5. At the end of the text, Jacobs writes about a woman who begged her to get her a newspaper. Why does Jacobs likely include this story in the text?
    A. To demonstrate the conflicting and often incorrect information received by slaves
    B. To condemn the illiteracy and lack of education enforced by slaveholders
    C. To correct the woman who thought America had a queen
    D. To bemoan the lack of available newspapers and literature in the South

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. American slaves were prohibited from learning how to read and write. How did this advance the cause of southern plantation owners?

2. Why do you think Harriet Ann Jacobs wrote under a pseudonym? Explain your answer.

3. How can fear be used to manipulate? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature in your answer.