

Inevitable? Inescapable?
Life Trajectories of White and Black Women

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning.

How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink" (472-73).

Though Harriet Jacobs shares many stories throughout the course of her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she does not share for simply anecdotal reasons. Rather, Jacobs offers the many "incidents" of her personal story with intent to enrage and to enlighten, as she exposes the inescapable truths of slavery. Jacobs identifies her target audience in the Preface of her work, writing:

But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince people of the Free States what slavery really is. (440)

Jacobs composes a narrative which effectively connects many microscopic moments and offers a profound analysis of slavery as a highly-organized system of oppression. In particular, she is concerned with the plight of black women, and focuses upon the inevitable truths of their futures. For instance, Jacobs offers a moving parable of the relationship between white and black girls which examines their girlhood interactions as a sharp contrast to their life trajectories and experiences of womanhood. Looking on as an outsider, Jacobs observes the apparent equality and feeling of mutuality between these girls as they play at a young age, but finds herself "turning sadly away," realizing the certainty of an oppressed future dictated by slavery (473).

A close reading of this passage presents the reader with valuable insight into Jacobs's thoughts regarding the omnipresence of slavery and the challenges of growing up as a black girl. Jacobs has meticulously chosen each of her words, resulting in the composition of a parable which offers a multifaceted analysis of the differences in the life trajectories of white and black women.

Aesthetic quality and physical movement play an important role in the parable, as Jacobs begins: "I once saw two beautiful children playing together ..." (472). The author immediately emphasizes external, physical beauty, which becomes an important theme. One of the girls is described almost redundantly as a "fair white child" (472). Certainly her complexion and status as a white girl are stressed, but use of the word "fair" also suggests her being "of character, conduct, reputation: free from moral stain, spotless, unblemished" (*OED*). Immediately, this "fair white child" is set up for social success, as her light complexion is paralleled by her unblemished character. Her beauty and skin-associated morality are further defined as she matures – "The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman" (473). There is a direct correlation between the fair white girl's beauty and her status as a bride at the conclusion of the parable.

Though "She [the black girl], also, was very beautiful," the young black girl's version of the story does not have the same fairy-tale ending. Jacobs uses this parable to examine the different implications of beauty in the lives of young white girls versus young black girls. While an attractive white girl is destined for success by fulfilling her social role as a beautiful bride, an attractive black girl faces a life of pain and guilt via the potentiality of sexual exploitation. The white woman's "happy bridal morning" is juxtaposed against the black woman's experience. Beauty is a curse for the young black girl, existing as yet another aspect of her life which she cannot control. Jacobs explains, "She [the black girl] drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink" (473). Through this sentence, Jacobs simply and powerfully explains the connection between a black woman's physical beauty and her feelings of guilt. The first half of

the sentence describes a girl drinking from the cup – which suggests voluntary action. However, the sentence concludes with the recognition that this “cup of sin, and shame, and misery” is not a choice at all, but rather is an obligatory action of the “persecuted race” (473).

Jacobs recognizes the characteristic dichotomy of beauty – as both a blessing and a curse. Society’s unequal ideologies are blatantly exposed – a white woman’s beauty leads to her success, while a black woman’s beauty leads to her downfall. Furthermore, the corruption lies in the fact that black women are made to feel guilty for the implications that are associated with their beauty. All too often, the distinction is not made between those who “drink the cup of sin,” and those who “are compelled to drink” (473). It is exactly here where slavery gains its power of systematic oppression. Society places a value in beauty - something that both white and black possess – yet only accepts it when presented by the dominant race. Thus, for every beautiful white girl, white society takes one step forward; and for every beautiful black girl, black society is pushed one step further behind. The intentional widening of the gap between black and white is fundamental to the cultivation of a divided society.

In the very first sentence of the parable, Jacobs complements the emphasized beauty by use of the three-word phrase “children playing together,” suggesting a sense of innocence and purity, lightheartedness and fun, as well as interaction and mutuality. There is a physical component of the girls’ relationship, as they are described to be “embracing each other,” which acknowledges positive human touch between white and black. The embrace demonstrates love, as well as recognition of the humanity which the two girls share. All too often, blacks are dehumanized and described as lacking emotion and compassion. Here, Jacobs deters such ideas via the emotional embrace of the white girl and the black girl.

The fact that they are “playing together” and “embracing” is demonstrative of the lacking dominance in the relationship between the two girls. Jacobs describes their potentially conflicting

roles – “One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister” (472). Due primarily to the sexual exploitation of black women by white men, there are many historical accounts of a black child being both the slave and the sister of her white counterpart. Undoubtedly, this sets the stage for a confusing relationship between the two. On one hand, slavery demands dominance, whereas sisterhood is characterized by equality. At this young age, the two girls act as sisters – yet Jacobs still chooses to place a stress upon white possession: “her slave” and “her sister” (472).

Though it begins as a lighthearted and innocent account of interracial friendship, Jacobs’s parable quickly takes a dark turn. She describes her actions as an observer through a powerful tripartite progression: “*I turned* sadly away from the lovely sight. *I foresaw* the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave’s heart. *I knew* how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs” (473). She builds up her emotions as an outside viewer, as she recognizes the future of the little slave. Despite the “lovely sight” and “joyous laughter” of these two young girls playing together, Jacobs is forced to turn away, for she cannot even bear to watch (472-73). There is a feeling of powerlessness on the part of Jacobs, the observer, as she turns sadly away and realizes the overbearing role that slavery continues to play.

With increasing certainty, Jacobs states that she “*foresaw* the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave’s heart” (473). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines blight in terms of botany as “any baleful influence of atmospheric or invisible origin, that suddenly blasts, nips, or destroys plants, affects them with disease, arrests their growth, or prevents their blossom from ‘setting’; a diseased state of plants of unknown or assumed atmospheric origin” (*OED*). Indeed, this imagery associated with plant growth and the deterioration of living things has been carefully selected by Jacobs. The “inevitable blight” comes from an “invisible origin,” yet has profound, identifiable effects. In other words, the intangible notion of slavery becomes increasingly tangible upon the observance of a young black girl’s degraded status. Blight refers to a diseased state – not simply a

hardship to overcome. Likewise, the young black girl lives within the regime of slavery, a system which permeates all aspects of her life. The inevitability of the situation is further enhanced by the idea of such blight “falling on the little slave’s heart” (473). Just as gravity always wins, Jacobs deems this “falling” to be seemingly predictable.

In the third part of Jacobs’s observer progression, she asserts even greater certainty, stating that she “*knew* how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs” (473). As an older black woman, Jacobs looks to this young black girl and knows what the future will hold. The certainty with which she asserts this change from laughter to sighs is unnerving, as is the impending future. Essentially, as the young black girl matures, her life will change from one of laughter to one of sighs; whereas the young white girl’s will progress from one of laughter to one of an assured happily-ever-after.

In her parable which ultimately examines the differences in the life trajectories of young white women versus young black women, Jacobs effectively utilizes the idea of maturation as a natural process. She first establishes the two girls as common and sharing in universality of the human experience. Upon adolescence, however, the commonality of the girls is usurped, as Jacobs explains their progression from girlhood to womanhood, identifying the profound differences between them. Described in terms of “pathways,” Jacobs suggests a sense of the process as systematically predetermined: “From childhood to womanhood her [the white girl’s] pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky” (473). In contrast, despite the black girl’s beauty, “the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her” (473). The idea of the white girl’s “blooming pathway” effectively contrasts the “inevitable blight” of the black girl. Despite their common beginnings and statuses as young girls, the process of natural maturation is presented as predetermined and bidirectional. In nature, or a world not yet mangled by mankind’s greed, both girls would mature in a similar fashion. Jacobs distinguishes between the natural and the unnatural

progression from girlhood to womanhood. While one's path blooms, the other is blighted – with slavery as a system of economic exploitation dictating both fates.

Repeatedly, Jacobs emphasizes the powerlessness of the young black girl in her life trajectory. Specifically, she poses the question “How had those years dealt with her [the white girl’s] slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood?” (473). The young black girl does not have the opportunity to “deal” with the years; rather, they deal with her. Though superficially a story of two girls’ lives, this parable presents a profound analysis of the racial differentiation of lifetimes. Jacobs elegantly offers an understanding of the past, present, and future, as she identifies the unjust role that slavery plays in the determination of a black woman’s fate.

Initially struck by the beauty and simplicity of this passage, I found myself reading it again and again in attempts to understand the thoughts that Jacobs presents on the idea of a woman’s destiny. She establishes a personal connection with the reader, as she unifies the reader with the characters via an understanding of growing up. Jacobs explicitly suggests that the life trajectory of a beautiful white woman is to become a beautiful white bride, while the life trajectory of a beautiful black woman is one of sin, shame, and misery. Both of these ultimate roles are necessary in the male-dominated slaveholding society of the 1800’s. Notably, these two ultimate roles are also fundamental to the functioning of today’s society. Particularly, there is a carefully calculated interplay between the two – as the beautiful white woman’s successes further degrade the beautiful black woman, and the beautiful black woman’s failures further elevate the status of the beautiful white woman.

This is where slavery emerges as a highly-organized system of oppression. In the natural world, both women would grow up and pursue their life trajectories as dictated by the natural environment – finding food, shelter, and a mate. However, slavery has interfered with the natural order of womanhood by dictating that some woman be oppressed due simply to the color of their

skin. Every aspect of slavery has been established as an intentional method of oppression. As a young white woman, I often recognize my “pathway blooming with flowers and overarched by a sunny sky,” but never before had considered the system which has presented me with such an easy-to-follow life trajectory (473). Growing up in an upper-middle class Boston suburb, attending a top university, and hoping eventually to be on my way to a “happy bridal morning,” I experience an indescribable sense of guilt when rereading Jacobs’s parable (473). Slavery as a system of economic exploitation has set me up for socially-determined success and has successfully permeated the current American lifestyle to the point where its well-established systems of oppression fail to be recognized. Relentlessly manipulated by the economic interests of white men, the life trajectories of black and white woman continue to suffer.

Jacobs writes to the women of the North in 1861 attempting to explain the unjust and “inevitable blight” of young black women; yet, in 2008, has much changed? Though Lehigh’s predominantly white student population may not necessarily define a woman’s success by her bridal status, there still exists an undeniable feeling of this pathway “overarched by a sunny sky” (473). Perhaps best described as a feeling of entitlement, the student population of Lehigh University seems to demand – and receive – these sunny skies. As we bask in this sunshine and stroll along our predetermined pathway, there are many women who are far more capable, driven, and determined – but who have been told that “the flowers of sunshine and love” are not for them. Jacobs has identified the power of slavery as a system which has long since been seeping into the understanding of an American woman’s life trajectory – predominantly based upon her status as slave or as sister.

Excerpt from “Chapter V. The Trials of Girlhood” (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs):

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