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TS History

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This week, readings included excerpts from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, “Ain’t I a Woman?” delivered by Sojourner Truth, and excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass describes his experiences as a slave; his writings convey three themes. Firstly, suppression of slave knowledge: attempts to learn how to write and to educate oneself were met with violence. Secondly, the corrupting force of slavery: the ideology that accompanied slavery demanded that slaves be seen as not human, and thus worthy of hate and cruelty; this was often further justified by religion. Thirdly, the permeation of slavery in multiple facets of society: sympathizers in the South could not take one step out of line for fear of social ostracization, and even in the North slave fugitives were at risk of kidnapping and being sent back to the South. These three themes perpetuated the cruel institution of slavery.

Sojourner Truth addresses the relationship between womanhood and slavery in her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” and argues that Northern women fighting about their rights should not ignore the rights of Southern slave women. While female slaves in the South were being beaten and worked to death, in the North there was high-minded talk about women having ‘the best place’; this contradiction could not be resolved, asserts Truth, without addressing the

brutality and dehumanization of slavery. If Christ came from a God and a woman, Truth reasons, then surely women have the rightful power to turn the world around to the right side.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writes of her experiences as a slave in an effort to arouse and organize Northerners in opposition to slavery. Her account begins with a preface and introduction asserting the validity of the narrative. In Chapter 5: “The Trials of Girlhood”, Jacobs details her sexual degradation as a 15-year-old slave. No law would protect a slave from exploitation, violence, or death; the only hinderance to ill treatment was the master’s self-image in the community. If Northerners truly understood the evils of slavery, Jacobs laments, they would fight more actively against it.

In her autobiography “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”, Harriet Jacobs adopts extremely humble and self-effacing tones, writing that she wished she was “more component to the task I have undertaken”¹, describes herself as weak and delicate, and furthermore claims that she sought not to attract attention or sympathy². This rhetoric serves the larger purpose of erasing her own autonomy to establish a status and morality deficit between the North and the South. That is, by portraying herself as weak and powerless, subject to the whims of her environment, she almost paradoxically mostly removes slaves themselves from the picture to emphasize the corrupted morality of Southerners and the enlightened intelligence of the Northerners. The objective, she admits freely, was not to impose pity and sympathy upon the audience of Northerners feel pity or sympathy – weak platitudes; instead, to incite strong emotions³. Painting herself as a passive vessel embodying the values of the sphere she existed within, she presses upon the unprincipledness of Southern slaveholders. In the chapter given, she discusses sexual

¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself* (Thayer & Eldrige, 1861), 5.

² Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 6.

³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 5.

violations imposed upon her, detailing the perversion of purity: "...I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature."⁴ The downplaying of slave control and agency in slavery itself is further expressed in her comparison of two girls, one white and one enslaved, by mapping out the destinies of each. The white child, she writes, will grow with no pains and unpleasantries; the black child is forced by the amoral Southern slaveholder to "drink the cup of sin, and shame, and misery"⁵. When she escaped to the North, however, she was described to have encountered "frequent intercourse with intelligent persons"⁶ that, being of higher morality, took an interest in her welfare and self-improvement. While the sinful morality of the Southern slaveowners is clearly and vividly painted, the morality of the Northerners is intentionally hesitantly established. By calling upon the Northerners to prove their questioned status as "noble men and women"⁷, Jacobs puts them in an active position to demonstrate and defend their morality. Instead of centering the conversation around the impact of the institution of slavery on slaves themselves, thus breeding positions of passivity, Jacobs more or less puts Northern and Southern whites in direct opposition to each other, levelling the playing field to promote more invigoration in Northerners against slavery.

⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44.

⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 48.

⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 8.

⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 48.