
Slavery And Its Morals In The Novel Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl

The definition of morals, according to OXFORD, is concerned with or derived from the code of interpersonal behavior that is considered right or acceptable in a particular society. Many white southerners, especially slave owners, almost acted as if these morals never existed. In the novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs, the author, explains her life while trying to escape her horrors and struggles of slavery. “*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was written as an autobiography in the form of a memoir, to highlight the more important parts of her life” (Butler). Harriet wrote this novel showing her experiences with the almost non-existent morals from her slave master, Dr. Flint. Throughout the entire book, Harriet focuses on the immorality of slavery, the many abuses, and expressing her little to no rights she had. She also showed the effect on slaveholder families.

Slaves received barely any rights from their master. Many of the rights included being able to read and write, attend church, or go into the town nearby. Slaves worked long, brutal hours under harsh conditions, for nothing for their services. As Harriet stated in the novel,

“I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.”
(Chapter 4)

Harriet had fought back against Dr. Flint., her slave master. He would often punish her for even talking back. When she was a young girl, Harriet was taught to read by her mistress and this was very uncommon for a slave to be able to read and write. Since she was able to learn something slaves were not taught, she believed she can prove to the southern white people that slaves were also people that should be educated. Harriet knew she was born with basic human rights and would fight until she was free of this. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first article states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. The slave masters took advantage of the slaves for being uneducated and the color of their skin. They took the rights slaves had and made them believe that slavery was their only option.

Slave masters in the south were usually white men and were controlling everything when it came to power, assigning slaves work, and punishment. Many of the slave masters had no morality when committing the love of their wives. Many wives of slave masters were affected by how their husbands would be attracted by the female slaves and soon it would turn into a sexual relationship. Harriet would explain in the novel how the household would change when some of the enslaved women would get pregnant. As Harriet explained in the novel,

“I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slaveholders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances”
(Chapter 6).

Many of the women just had to deal with what the husbands were doing to the enslaved women. Harriet would also explain that mistresses would change many of their morals because of the husbands cheating on them. The wives would also get jealous of the slave women as they believed the slave women were seducing the husband when it was the other way around, as the husband would be pushing for a sexual relationship, consensual or not. Many enslaved women tried to refuse a sexual relationship with their masters but would be forced or threatened if they would not comply. Husbands would go against their morals of loving and respecting their wives and the respect of consent from another woman. This type of action would be so common in the south and many would not speak about it.

While the slaves would fight to gain their rights, they were mostly abused for fighting back. Many believe that they were only abused physically but that is not even the entire story. Slaves went through physical abuse, mental abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. This was the 5 abuses they would go through daily during their long brutal hours on the field. Slave masters would twist their minds and almost destroy their mental state, they were still expected to work as if nothing even happened. These terrible daily abuses seemed to be normal to people in the south. According to Harriet,

If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment; and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls. (Chapter 9)

Harriet wanted to explain how you cannot even try to act as if this is normal to own people. She also wanted to explain the abuse and hell Dr. Flint would make her go through and if you would just go onto the plantation to hear the abuse, it would mess with your mentality.

In conclusion, the slave system was morally wrong but seemed to be normal to white southerners. The immorality of slavery included the actions the white southerners continued to show, with nothing opposing the way they were acting. With the idea of this abuse being normal, slave masters would abuse slaves and almost brainwash them to think this is all they have in life. The slaves had no rights and the abuse would affect not only the slave's family, but the slave master's family. Lastly, white southerners continued this cycle of life as though they weren't harming the country and their morals were correct.

Work Cited

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3. Jacobs, Harriet. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001. Print