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Deepening and Challenging Morgan's Argument About the Gender Differences Present in the Slave Narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs

Instead of accepting the rigid racial expectations set in their time, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs redefined the concept of freedom as a progression towards restoring one's humanity through literacy, emotional resilience, and relationships. The two authors seek to challenge the dehumanizing effects of slavery by rhetorically portraying their personal experiences as a form of resistance. Critic Winifred Morgan argues in "Gender-Related Differences in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass," that gender helped to structure the narrative techniques used by both authors when writing in the antebellum period. She asserts that men emphasize the power of literacy and the fight for individualism, while women highlight the moral authority, the importance of relationships, and maternalism. Although Morgan's framework is persuasive, it oversimplifies each author's construction of agency by placing the narratives into rigid categories. A closer analysis of Douglass and Jacobs reveal several discrepancies with Morgan's argument: (1) The way Douglass achieved autonomy can also be linked to social mediation and a strong dependence on relationships; (2) Jacobs's narrative is not purely focused on relationships, but a display of intellectual rhetoric, strategy, and self-proficiency; (3) Relationships and literacy complement and intersect each other in each

character's path to freedom; and (4) Both Douglass and Jacobs strategically emphasize different areas in order to appeal to different audiences and for specific political purposes.

Douglass's journey to becoming literate shows how intellectuality was not the only way he gained freedom. Instead, it was a complex social process shaped by resistance, teaching, and the strategic navigation of power in order to attain literacy. Douglass begins to engage in political literature, particularly *The Colombian Orator,* which included essays and dialogues that introduced him to ideas of liberty. This sharpened his awareness, allowing him to begin his path to freedom: "The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery" (121). Douglass is able to rebel against his enslavement because literacy provides him with the language needed to both articulate injustice and undermine it. However, Douglass's education is not simply an individual achievement, it stems from different social interactions/contexts. While he received informal instruction by his mistress, he learns to read by obtaining bits of information from the "little white boys" in his neighborhood, through shared words and letters. Douglass converted them into teachers and "with their kindly aid…finally succeeded in learning to read," (121). The childhood innocence of the boys effectively destabilizes and subverts the racial hierarchy the adults had enforced. Douglass further engages in literary as well as political texts circulating in his community, helping to expand his knowledge. For example, reading *The Columbian Orator* "gave tongue to interesting thoughts on [his] own soul," (121). This passage portrays literacy as resurrecting his inner life from suppression, restoring his voice that had been unfairly denied.

Douglass even includes the opposition from his master as crucial to his education: "In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid

of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both" (119). His master's vehement insistence that reading "would forever unfit him to be a slave" (119), demonstrated to Douglass the power of literacy in challenging the logic of slavery. He realized that becoming literate effectively destabilized the system he was confined to. This passage highlights Douglass' recognition of social connections and conflicts forging his pursuit of literacy. Significantly, when Douglass becomes an author and public orator, he pushes his literacy outward to the community. He uses it as a weapon to persuade the public and organize abolitionist movements. Therefore, Douglass's narrative presents literacy as equally reliant on individual achievement as well as social experiences when pursuing collective freedom. While Morgan believes that Douglass's emphasis on literacy was a portrayal of masculinity, his rhetorical power also depended on different social forces.

While Douglass uses literacy to publicly challenge the system of enslavement, Jacobs uses different rhetorical strategies. She uses relational and domestic language to survive, strategically concealing and applying moral sentiments in order to assert her self-identity and to expose the sexual violence enslaved women must live through. The structure of Jacobs's narrative embodies the views of femininity during the nineteenth century, where she grounds the moral authority she receives from her relationships. "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (154). Beyond the domestic tone, however, Jacobs utilizes strategic intelligence and craft. For example, her decision to conceal herself in her grandmother's attic (in a "dismal hole" (87)) for seven years can be seen as calculated resistance and discipline. As Morgan highlights, Jacobs "has no other resource than her relationships with family members and close friends and… low cunning" (85).

Her emotional undertone in the language of her narrative thus helps to conceal an analytical awareness of the strategic placement of rhetoric and audience appeal. Unlike Douglass, Jacobs could not engage in open confrontation, as this was not possible for an enslaved woman who was constantly under threat of being sexually coerced. She understood exactly how events must be positioned and how her suffering must be framed in order to invoke sympathy from her white female readers. Therefore, she uses sentimentality as a form of persuasion, using both domesticity and maternalism for political gain. She does this by transforming her motherly love for her children as a form of moral authority, thus exposing the hypocrisy of slavery in destroying families. Although Morgan dismisses sentimentality as a concept of femininity, Jacobs utilizes it to craft an intellectual argument for liberation. She emotionally resonates with her readers, strategically controlling the narrative to demand freedom for the enslaved.

Both narratives show that literacy is a process developed by relationships, rather than an individual achievement. This reveals that intellect and compassion collectively function in gaining freedom and self-identity. Morgan argues for the distinct binary of qualities that Douglass and Jacobs embody, namely the autonomous and the relational respectively. However, Douglass achieved his education through several different relationships, while Jacobs used her moral authority alongside her intellect. Even Morgan accepts that "the slave narratives of male and female writers together… offer insight on balancing individualism and community" (92).

Douglass's literacy allows him to solidify his relationship with the African American community as well as appeal to white abolitionists. Jacobs's narrative, although domestic and sentimental, is strategically controlled in order to maximize her appeal to her audience. By

constructing her narrative through direct addresses and calls to sympathy, Jacobs effectively uses emotional intimacy as a rhetorical strategy. This can be seen in the line, “But, O, ye happy women…do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!” (169), where her direct appeal evokes sympathy from the audience as they morally witness her suffering. Overall, in each narrative, freedom is connected to both intellect and emotion, with a complex interplay between securing a public voice and cherishing private ties, speaking to the mind and appealing to the heart.

Both Douglass and Jacobs are careful in tailoring how they represent themselves to each audience. Instead of being limited by the set expectations placed on gender, they each transformed those norms into strategies, helping them attain influence in the political sphere of the broader abolitionist movement. Douglass displays his self-mastery in a masculine manner, essentially helping to associate the narrative with the abolitionist culture that prized qualities like eloquence. Such a strategy aligned with the abolitionist ideal of the self-made citizen, used to prove black people are capable of being intellectual individuals. Conversely, Jacobs applies a domestic framework in order to persuade white female readers that enslaved women were also “someone’s children, sisters, wives, mothers, and friends,” (90), and that as women they share similar virtues.

Morgan highlights that the two authors “appealed to the humanity they shared with their readers” (74), both understanding that persuasion resulted from the strategic presentation of the self. However, the authors differed in their choice of cultural language in order to achieve this. While Douglass heavily relied on rationale, he also frequently appealed to the moral consciousness of his readers as well. In particular, he sought to expose the contradictions found

in Christian ideologies because of the existence of slavery. Douglass achieved this by using figurative language, describing bondage as a type of spiritual imprisonment. He brought to light the "corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity" of the South (151). Similarly, Jacobs highlights Christian hypocrisy through the description of her enslaver's predation, contrasting it with the virtue of compassion that her grandmother exhibits. She also used metaphors to depict her suffocation under enslavement, exclaiming that she would "rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death" (168). Although Douglass publicly emphasized self-mastery while Jacobs highlighted the virtues of domesticity, they both manipulated their narratives, using figurative language to safely expose the hypocrisies prevalent in slavery. Therefore, the differences in their rhetoric stems from the need to adapt to circumstances that place heavy restrictions on slave narratives.

Overall, the narratives of both Douglass and Jacobs intersect between the rigid gendered categories that Morgan placed them in. They each blend the concepts of relationships, moral authority, and intellect to redefine freedom as individualist as well as communal. These overlaps in their paths to freedom are visible when Douglass socially embeds his literacy and aims it towards uplifting his community, while Jacobs places emphasis on more relational rhetoric blended with hidden strategic intellect and self-identity. The cultural limitations imposed on each gender are converted into powerful rhetoric with Douglass's intellect stemming from relationships, while Jacobs's relationships become dependent on her intellect. Therefore, the concepts of literacy and relationships do not contradict but complement each other in order for each character to reclaim their own sense of self. Although Morgan provides a useful framework,

the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs ultimately transcend any gender distinctions by universally endeavoring in their struggle for autonomy, whether through literacy or relationships.