The Importance of Audience in Jacobs's *Incidents* and Douglass's *Narrative*

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No story is ever written without the intent of being read; that is simply the nature of writing. No one writes a story or narrative without considering who is going to read a piece of literature, and, as with most things, any good piece of literature is meticulously crafted to deliver a very specific, targeted message to its audience. The audience is, whether directly stated or not, the driving force behind any work of literature.

Looking at slave narratives, this is doubly true. Historically, the narratives of enslaved people have been employed with a twofold purpose: firstly, to describe and visualize for 18th- and 19th- century audiences the atrocities of slavery; secondly, in relation to the first, to advocate for the abolition of the system of slavery. It is in this respect that we can see the relation to the audience. To deliver a powerful message that would influence its reader base to proactively seek out change in their local communities, authors of slave narratives had to have intimate knowledge of audience tastes.

The slave narratives *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass perfectly personify the idea of specifically identifying, addressing, and catering to the intended audience. Douglass utilizes elements of romanticized violence and epic struggle to extract interest and empathy from a targeted male audience; in turn, Jacobs uses rhetoric similar to that of other women's literature of the time period, in that it is passive, focusing upon patience and endurance rather than on direct action to change circumstances. This initial target audience distinguishes both their style and approach to writing. However, what makes Jacobs's writing far more complex than Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* is that, unlike Douglass, while Jacobs's initial audience is other women from her era, specifically white Northerners, she has also structured her entire work, while not necessarily addressing a male audience, to match the expectations that men had at the time for the subject matter of women's writing.

Douglass released his slave narrative, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845, sixteen years before both the publishing of Jacobs's work and the start of the American Civil War. Douglass's *Narrative* is without a doubt crafted for a predominantly male audience and, considering the time period, subject matter, and political nature of the piece, white Northerners. This is evident in both what Douglass writes about in his narrative and how he writes about events in his narrative. Douglass writes *The Narrative* like an epic; like *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, or *Gilgamesh*, Douglass utilizes violence, fate, and a journey to align his personal story of being enslaved and escaping bondage. By doing this, he seeks to appeal to a male, predominantly Northern audience that enjoyed these narratives of struggle and burden. Douglass employs this narrative style consistently throughout the narrative, but it is best seen in Chapter Ten, in which Douglass says, during an attempt by Mr. Covey to punish Douglass, "I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose…. He trembled like a leaf…. I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers" (Douglass 1203). This passage provides much to unpack about how Douglass employs both masculine language and violence in the pursuit of attracting his target audience. Like Odysseus standing up to the cyclops Polyphemus or Gilgamesh battling Humbaba, Douglass uses Mr. Covey as his monster to overcome; by setting up in the first half of the chapter the sheer vileness of Covey in his treatment of the enslaved people around him, Douglass is mythologizing his conflict with him. It transforms from a simple fist fight between two people to an epic clash of wills, a fight to determine whether Douglass will be willing to fight for his freedom, or wallow in needless pain and bondage. This would without a doubt have resonated with his contemporaries, in that Douglass has utilized this action to place himself on the same level as Odysseus, Beowulf, and Gilgamesh, a hero fighting against all odds. Furthermore, the way that Douglass describes his victory also adds to his heroic myth that he creates in order to build sympathy. After finally standing up to him, Douglass describes Mr. Covey as "like a leaf," as weakened and triumphed over. Overall, what this serves as is a prime example of how Douglass address his audience: by transforming himself into this epic mythical hero, he transcends the mundane and embeds himself in the minds of his audience. While he is a real person, his story isn't forgettable; it becomes memorable.

Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* shares some similarities with Douglass's *Narrative* in that they are both slave narratives; however, the similarities start and end there. Jacobs's work differs from Douglass's work in language, action, and events, and this is due to the fact that she is not addressing the same audience that Douglass sought to address in his own narrative. Jacobs's audience is white female Northerners predominantly, and her goal, based upon the nature of the text, is to persuade them to advocate for the abolition of slavery, similar to Douglass. Where Douglass's text caters to a male audience, Jacobs's is the opposite, catering to a female audience instead. This is done through the use of passivity and endurance. Unlike Douglass's story of physical rebellion and almost mythological battles of willpower and strength, Jacobs's narrative is not one of constant direct confrontations, but rather an almost divinely-given endurance. This can be found throughout her work. In Chapter Ten, Jacobs says, "He hoped I had become convinced of the injury I was doing myself by incurring his displeasure. He wrote that he had made up his mind to go to Louisiana…. However that might be, I was determined that I would never go to Louisiana with him" (Jacobs 916). Jacobs's clashes with Dr. Flint stand in stark contrast with, for example, those between Douglass and Covey; rather than direct, head-on violence being utilized as an expression of rebellion and freedom, Jacobs expresses rebellion through passive means. Her narrative here becomes far more aligned with captivity narratives, the best example and the one sharing a common audience being Mary Rowlandson's. In Rowlandson's captivity narrative, the hallmark of her resistance to captivity is not in proactive physical defiance, but rather in a passive, inner resistance tied deeply to religion. As she says, "I have thought since of the wonderful goodness of God to me in preserving me in the use of my reason and senses in that distressed time, that I did not use wicked and violent means to end my own miserable life" (Rowlandson 273). As Rowlandson shows, like in slavery narratives, the basis of the strength of passivity is drawn from religious faith. These same themes, seen across a plethora of literature written to a female audience around this time, are also blatantly seen throughout Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

However, beyond simply sharing a connection in that they are both slave narratives, and being distinctly different in that they primarily are designed to address a singular, distinct audience, Jacobs's text has an additional layer of complexity in the way that it addresses its audience that is not present in Douglass's work. Unlike Douglass, who is, for the most part, addressing a male audience, along with her predominantly female audience, Jacobs also meticulously crafts her narrative to meet the male expectation of women's writing of the time. As Fanny Fern points out in her text "Male Criticism on Ladies' Books," "Is it in feminine novels *only* that courtship, marriage, servants, and children are the staple? Is not this true of all novels? ---of Dickens, of Thackeray, of Bulwer, and a host of others?" (Fern 899). As Fern perfectly articulates, the topics and nature of female literature, in the minds of men from the period, were to fit an expected, specific narrative. Jacobs wrote her narrative not only to appeal to women, but also so that it could be approved by whatever male audience might come into contact with the text and read it, thus boosting overall the amount of people the piece reaches. This showcases a complexity in audience understanding that is not present in Douglass's work.

Overall, there is a definite connection between Jacob's and Douglass's works, in that they are both authors of slave narratives who expertly identify and address their intended audiences by adapting each text to attract a specific demographic. Furthermore, when comparing their complexity of audience consideration and engagement, it is easily arguable that Jacobs clearly has taken far more steps to both acknowledge and engage a wider audience than Douglass has taken.

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