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"A Mediating Force": The Sympathetic White Male in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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One of the distinguishing features of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is Linda Brent's repeated acknowledgement of people, both slave and free, and of both the North and South, who were helpful to her and her family throughout their experiences in slavery¹. While this is oftentimes noted in scholarship on Jacobs' slave narrative, such discussions specifically focus on what is considered Jacobs' representation of and underlying call for a sisterhood that transcends racial boundaries. In these discussions, scholars focus on a small number of white female figures in the text who are sympathetic to the plight of the slave woman and represent Jacobs' appeal to white women of the North to help and support women in slavery; such scholarship therefore often overlooks the ways in which sympathetic white males function in the narrative. Readings that address Jacobs' call for sisterhood reveal her efforts to cross racial boundaries through her female readers' sympathetic identification with Linda; like

¹ While both slaves and free people aid in the lives of Linda and her family, my particular interest is in the role of free people in the narrative. Such figures signify Jacobs' efforts as a black writer to depict the lives of people not only outside of enslavement, but more importantly, outside of her own race.

wise, a reading of the function of sympathetic white males in the narrative will reveal Jacobs' attempt to generate sympathy of her white male readers by mediating their identification with Linda through these figures in the text. Looking at Jacobs' depiction of sympathetic white males will clarify her efforts to appeal to male readers, as well as illuminate the complexity of her efforts to appeal to her women readers—both through the representation of sympathetic women and men that work in conjunction with "unsympathetic" whites throughout the text².

Many of the narrative's sympathetic characters, both female and male, are minor characters who are fleeting in the lives of the slaves to whom they reach out. Nevertheless, as evident in the already established focus on sympathetic white women in the text, and as I will show through this reading of the narrative, the roles of all of these sympathetic figures are crucial to the experiences of Linda and her family, even when their sympathy is not directly responsible for the slave's ability to escape. Understanding the complexity of how sympathetic whites function in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

² As the paper will show, my characterization of figures as sympathetic is based on any level of support, protection, or aid given to a slave, whether this be only one act of such sympathy or sincere dedication to abolition. Likewise, my characterization of unsympathetic figures ranges from any degree of support of the institution of slavery to that of figures like the Flints. Also, while most of the paper is based on this distinction between these two categories, I will address a complication within this categorization in my discussion of Mr. Sands.

is vital to understanding one of the most important slave narratives of the antebellum period as well as the significance of how Jacobs develops characters outside of her race and gender. Therefore, responding to readings of sympathetic white women in the text, this paper will analyze Jacobs' attempts to generate sympathy on the part of both female and male readers through the development of white male figures who play a key part in helping the lives of slaves throughout *Incidents*.

At issue in a discussion of Jacobs' use of sympathy are the implications of the extent to which this strategy requires the reader's imaginative identification with the slave. The nature of such identification may imply that readers essentially blur the differences between their experiences and those of the slave in the text; however, I will argue that the way in which Jacobs elicits sympathy through the sympathetic white males in the text does not require that her readers diminish the true nature of the slave's experience by substituting it with their own imaginative suffering in order to identify with the slave. Rather, making use of Glenn Hendler's discussion of the "culture of sentiment" in *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, I will argue that the sympathetic white males in the text act as mediators between the reader and the slave and therefore enable such imaginative identification without the collapse of the fundamental differences between the experiences of the reader and the slave. Hendler defines sympathy as "an emotional response to reading or seeing an expression of another's feelings. It is thus at its core an act of identification" (3).

Regardless of this connection between sympathy and identification, I would argue that the characters throughout *Incidents* that I refer to as sympathetic are not necessarily so due to this identification that Hendler describes. Rather, these characters are sympathetic due to their compassion towards and support for various slaves derived either from their ability to identify with Linda, as may be the case with some of the female characters, or simply from their personal connections to or involvement with Linda or her family, as in the case of both female and male characters. These sympathetic characters, then, enable readers, who clearly do not have personal connections to Linda or her family, to identify with these figures and develop a politics of antislavery.

As Hendler discusses in his reading of Adam Smith, the act of sympathetic identification requires some form of mediation, whether this mediation be the imagination of the reader or, as I argue, the development of a third party. It is my position that the mediating force between Jacobs' white female readers and the text is the readers' imagination, which enables them to identify with Linda as a mother or victim of sexual exploitation regardless of their racial differences. The mediating force for Jacobs' white male readers is the sympathetic white male figure with whom the male reader can identify and therefore develop sympathy towards the "sufferer" in the narrative. While Hendler acknowledges that the "mediating force" can collapse and therefore problematize sympathetic identification between a reader and character who are separated by differences such as race, gender, or class, it is my

position that the consistency with which Jacobs develops the sympathetic white figure throughout *Incidents* prevents such a collapse or erasing of racial or gender differences and subsequent diminishing of the slave's experience. Rather, I argue that, reflective of Dana Nelson's reading of *Incidents* as discussed by Hendler, Jacobs' use of sympathy within her narrative "bridge[s] the gap of difference" rather than "collaps[ing] the difference that it bridges" (qtd. in Hendler 8). Jacobs' strategy of using sympathy to appeal to her readers does not necessitate the erasure of racial or gender differences nor the diminishing of the slave's actual experience; rather, her strategy, as I will discuss in this reading of the text, enables sympathy to develop regardless of racial or gender differences and while maintaining the reality of the slave's suffering.

Interestingly, in *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*, Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that while "a sentimental tale elicits tears and sighs [and] enrolls the reader's bodily responses in the act of overcoming difference," *Incidents* "rarely, if ever, [makes its readers] gasp or weep" (134-135). Furthermore, she argues that "the text's assumptions about its readers' bodily experiences disallow comprehension of or identification with Linda's choices" (135). While I will not attempt to account for the reactions of Jacobs' readers to her narrative, it is my position that Jacobs not only allows her readers to identify with the slaves in the text, but more significantly, that Jacobs intentionally develops sympathetic white figures throughout *Incidents* in order to provoke her readers to do more than "gasp or weep"-

more importantly, she does so in order to provoke her readers to take action in support of the slave.

Identifying the Reader

Several scholars have made an attempt to recognize Jacobs' emphasis of the role of many people in the lives of Linda and her family in *Incidents*; however, these scholars have failed to note the complexity and profound impacts of these observations on Jacobs' text. For example, in "Outraged Mother and Articulate Heroine: Linda Brent and the Slave Narrative Genre," Joanne Braxton discusses how female slaves developed a new literary genre through the telling of their experiences, yet in doing so, she only briefly addresses the significance of Jacobs' use of sympathetic figures in her narrative. She writes, "One important difference between *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and narratives of heroic male slaves is that the heroine celebrates the cooperation of all the people, slave and free, who make her freedom possible. She celebrates her liberation and her children's as the fruit of a collective effort, not an individual one" (19-20). This observation, while significant in its recognition of the outside aid responsible for Linda's freedom, is limited by Braxton's particular focus on people's roles in helping Linda and her children achieve freedom, subsequently overlooking such cooperation involved with helping Linda and her family survive life in slavery before escape is even a possibility. Furthermore, in this passage Braxton does not develop the distinction

between these sympathetic characters in terms of race or gender.

Also drawing a similar distinction between Jacobs' text and male slave narratives, Valerie Smith's "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" only briefly mentions this aspect of the text and does so without discussing its implications. She writes, "Jacobs readily acknowledges the support and assistance she received, as the description of her escape makes clear. Not only does she diminish her own role in her escape, but she is quick to recognize the care and generosity of her family in the South and her friends in the North" (217). This reading is limited in its assumption that those who helped Linda in the South were only members of her family, and likewise, that those who helped her in the North were all personal friends. Additionally, similar to Braxton, Smith's reading is limited by its focus on the help of others that is directly related to the acquisition of freedom.

A final example is Sandra Gunning's "Reading and Redemption in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." Questioning the role of the Northerner in *Incidents*, Gunning asserts in her conclusion, "Throughout Brent has been helped in small ways by Southern slave mistresses, slave traders, and others who empathize with the slave's plight. But for Brent effective white empathy must be accompanied with an activism that acknowledges a connection rather than a dislocation between black and white bodies" (150). Gunning then proceeds to conclude her essay with a reading of how

the second Mrs. Bruce functions in the narrative. While Gunning, unlike Braxton and Smith, does address white sympathetic characters not limited directly to Linda's escape, her reading is nevertheless similar to Braxton's and Smith's in that Gunning does not consider the role of gender in this observation, and she limits the support as it is given only to Linda. More significant, however, is Gunning's description of what qualifies as "effective white empathy," that which is based on action motivated by the degree to which the white figures can identify with the plight of the slave. I will complicate Gunning's claim that the help of various people throughout Linda's experiences is not considered "effective white empathy" through an examination of the integral role that sympathetic white males play in the lives of several slaves, which represents their ability to overcome the racial boundaries, which Gunning claims prevent such "effective" behavior.

These observations as well as discussions of Jacobs' representation of a sisterhood between slave and white women in the text overlook the function of sympathetic white males due to a widely accepted assumption regarding Jacobs' intended audience. Scholars appear to agree that Jacobs intended to appeal directly to her white Northern women readers only through the depiction of white women of the North and South who were sympathetic to the plight of the slave woman. This, however, is based on the assumption that Jacobs had only white women in mind

as she developed her narrative³. This assumption is driven by readings of Jacobs' own explicit recognition of her readers in the preface and throughout the text. In the preface to *Incidents*, Jacobs explains that her goal is "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" and "to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is" (1-2).

Clearly, Jacobs identifies her readers in two ways here, one limited to Northern women and the other encompassing both women and men of the North, perhaps white and black. While Jacobs does not specify that "women of the North" refers to white women only, her assumption that these women are unfamiliar with a clear sense of the slave woman's condition in the South suggests that she is in fact addressing not just women of the North, but white women of the North. Most scholars focus on this set of readers as this seems supported by many of Jacobs' direct addresses to her readers throughout *Incidents*, which then work in conjunction with the development of sympathetic white women in the text.

³ Frances Smith Foster complicates this, and I'll address her discussion of Jacobs' audience shortly. William Andrews also complicates this assumption with his discussion of Jacobs' "implied male reader," but he ultimately concludes that Jacobs was writing for a female audience. For his definition of an implied reader, see *To Tell a Free Story*, page 30; for his discussion of Jacobs' audience, see pages 250-253.

For example, as Linda reveals her decision to have a sexual affair with Mr. Sands in order to "enrage" Dr. Flint, Jacobs writes, "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by the law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!" (54). Furthermore, Jacobs writes,

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom [...]. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hatred tyrant. [...] The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others.
(55-56)

Clearly, in these two passages, Jacobs is directly addressing white women readers in hopes that they will recognize their own distance from her situation and not hold her up to the standards of a free white woman.

In order to further generate this sympathy, Jacobs depicts several white women throughout the text, such as the white slaveholding woman in the chapter, "Months of Peril"—a character who is nameless in accordance with her request to keep her kindness to a slave woman unknown to the community. Described as an old acquaintance of Linda's grandmother who had always "felt interested for [Linda's mother and her

children]," this woman responds to the agony of Linda's grandmother-caused by Linda's hiding, subsequent to the fact that her children were to be "broke in" at the Flint's plantation (99). Seeing Aunt Martha's pain and hearing her description of Linda's hiding, this "kind" slaveholding woman betrays the trust of her family and community and risks her reputation and her well-being by offering to conceal Linda in her own house. As a result of this offer, Aunt Martha "was unable to thank the lady for this noble deed; overcome by her emotions, she sank on her knees and sobbed like a child" (99). Likewise, Linda was overwhelmed by this deed: "How my heart overflowed with gratitude! Words choked in my throat; but I could have kissed the feet of my benefactress. For that deed of Christian womanhood, may God forever bless her!" (100). Although Jacobs does clarify that this woman is "unlike the majority of slaveholder's wives" (99), her development of this white woman's response to Linda's situation as a result of her sexual act, which resulted from her victimization as a slave woman, nevertheless indicates one way in which Jacobs attempts to appeal to her Northern white women readers. The fact that this Southern slaveholder is able to understand and sympathize with the hardship that Linda has to go through as a victim of sexual exploitation by her master is intended to provoke a similar sense of sympathy and action within Jacobs' readers who can likewise sympathize with Jacobs' plight not necessarily as a slave, but as a woman and mother.

The existing scholarship that addresses sympathetic white

figures in the text is based on such a reading and therefore focuses only on Jacobs' attempts to appeal to her female readers through sympathetic white women in the narrative. A major example of such a reading of sisterhood in *Incidents* is provided by Jean Fagan Yellin in her introduction to Jacobs' text⁴. Recognizing some of the sympathetic white women in the narrative, Yellin explains that perhaps "these women are responding to Linda Brent's oppression as a woman exploited sexually and as a mother trying to nurture her children" (xxxiii). Furthermore, Yellin argues, "A central pattern in *Incidents* shows white women betraying allegiances of race and class to assert their stronger allegiance to the sisterhood of all women" (xxxiii). Yellin supports this claim with a reading of Jacobs' preface to *Incidents* in which, as discussed earlier, Jacobs explicitly clarifies what she considers to be her intended audience. Yellin writes,

In her signed preface Jacobs's narrator invites this reading by the way in which she identifies her audience and announces her purpose: '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... .' Jacobs's book-reaching across the gulfs separating black women from white, slave from free, poor from rich, bridging

⁴ From Yellin's "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself" published in *The Slave's Narrative* (Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) in 1985.

the chasm separating 'bad' women from 'good' - represents an attempt to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that sisterhood in the public arena. (xxxiii)

Yellin clearly connects the sympathetic white women in the text to Jacobs' effort to cross racial boundaries through directing *Incidents* exclusively towards white women of the North.

Similarly, Frances Smith Foster provides a comparative reading of *Incidents*, although Foster does take into account the second group of readers acknowledged in Jacobs' preface cited earlier, which Yellin overlooks in her reading. Foster reads Jacobs' "people of the Free States" as not limited to the women of the North and argues that "Overall, Harriet Jacobs intended to reach a diverse audience, one not limited by gender, race, politics, or literary preferences" (*Written* 83). Afterwards, however, Foster continues to argue that "Jacobs directly identified 'the women of the North,' a group that included women of color but one that implies especially white middle-class women who had not yet committed themselves to the anti-slavery struggle, as her intended audience" (83, emphasis added). Clearly, Foster recognizes that Jacobs did not intend to exclude anyone from her reading audience, but she ultimately argues that Jacobs' particular focus was on her white women readers of the North.

Furthermore, Foster reads the establishment of sisterhood in *Incidents* similarly to Yellin. In *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, Foster discusses the influence of Jacobs' audience on her development

of relationships between black and white women, specifically that of Linda's grandmother, Aunt Martha, with Aunt Martha's mistress' sister, Miss Fanny. Foster describes this relationship as "one that exemplified the possibilities of the mutual support Jacobs envisioned between the free white women to whom she wrote and their enslaved sisters" (114). Significantly, however, Foster, unlike Yellin, acknowledges that Jacobs did not intend to represent an unconditional sisterhood between women of all races. Foster argues, "[Jacobs] asserts a common sisterhood, but at the same time Jacobs warns against conflating the situations of enslaved black women and free white ones, asserting that the former suffered perils that provided subsequent prerogatives for the latter" (96). Foster concludes by arguing that "Jacobs discloses both the positive and negative interactions and mutual dependencies that slavery creates for women" (116), but she nevertheless maintains that Jacobs intended to develop some form of sisterhood between slave and white women.

More directly responding to Yellin's reading of Jacobs' effort to appeal to her white female readers, Hazel Carby argues that although Jacobs intended to develop such a sisterhood through her text, she ultimately fails to do so. After quoting the latter Yellin passage above, Carby writes, "However, these bonds of sisterhood are not easily or superficially evoked. 'Sisterhood' between white and black women was realized *rarely* in the text of *Incidents*. Jacobs's appeal was to a *potential* rather than an *actual* bonding between white and black women" (51, emphasis added). Carby continues,

"Many of the relationships portrayed between Linda Brent and white women involve cruelty and betrayal and place white female readers in the position of having to realize their implications in the oppression of black women, prior to any actual realization of the bonds of 'sisterhood'" (51). Carby's reading of *Incidents* then proceeds to analyze how Jacobs developed her text in lieu of and in response to her exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood. It's clear that Carby also understands Jacobs' audience to be white women and that Jacobs, although unsuccessfully, directly attempts to appeal to them through her depiction of sympathetic white women⁵.

Looking to the Text

Despite the prominence of such readings in *Incidents* scholarship, it's inaccurate to assume that Jacobs' identification of

⁵ Another scholar who similarly reads Jacobs' audience and her appeal to this audience is Franny Nudelman in "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering." Based on Nudelman's understanding of the relationship between Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, she argues that the writer and editor "agree that the narrative's purpose is to prompt the political agency of white middle-class northern women by communicating the extremity of the slave woman's sexual degradation" (944). Furthermore, Nudelman argues, "[Jacobs and Child] assume that Jacobs can successfully communicate her degradation to women who have never experienced its equivalent, and that these women will receive this communication, responding to her subjection as if it were their own" (949).

her audience in her preface and her addresses to the reader throughout the narrative are aimed exclusively at a female audience and subsequently that Jacobs attempted only to generate sympathy through sympathetic white females. In fact, within the first few chapters of the narrative, there is a balance of addresses to both women and men, which indicates her efforts to appeal to male readers through Incidents as well as female readers. In the very first chapter of the narrative, Jacobs introduces Linda's family's history in slavery and discusses the inherent absence of trust between a slave and his or her master or mistress. Jacobs writes, "The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property" (6, emphasis in original). Clearly, such knowledge is not limited to women only, and therefore the reader in this case is not defined by gender. Then, in the third chapter, "The New Master and Mistress," Jacobs specifically addresses her female readers: "O, you happy free women, contrast *your* New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman!" (16, emphasis in original). In Chapter 5, "The Trials of Girlhood," Jacobs uses the language of "reader" without specifying gender, yet it seems as though she is addressing women in particular. She writes, "I do it [tell her story of suffering in slavery] to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered" (29). While the language of sisterhood here refers to that among slave women, Jacobs seems to use such language to appeal to her women readers whom she

hopes will develop a sisterhood that transcends racial limits.

Significantly, however, three short paragraphs later, Jacobs writes, "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north?" (29-30). It's clear throughout these variations in addresses to her readers that Jacobs' intended audience includes but extends beyond white women. Therefore, it's inadequate to assume that her strategy of appealing to her readers is limited to the depiction of sympathetic white women, as scholarship that focuses on what is considered Jacobs' call for sisterhood suggests. Just as Jacobs depicts a Southern slaveholding woman to appeal to her white women readers of the North, as in the example discussed earlier, Jacobs depicts white males, from both the North and South, to strengthen the appeal to her women readers and to appeal directly to her male readers that are clearly included in her addresses such as those above, as well as in her identification of "the people of the Free States" in the preface.

Jacobs' first depiction of a sympathetic white man is in the chapter focused on Linda's uncle Benjamin and his escape to freedom, "The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man." During Benjamin's attempt to flee to the North, he is identified by the captain of the vessel as matching the advertisement for his capture and is subsequently taken back to his master and jailed. Juxtaposed with the white captain responsible for Benjamin's capture and with Benjamin's slaveholder himself whose treatment provoked Benjamin's escape, the jailer is described as "a kind-hearted man" whom Linda and her fam-

ily had known for years (21). He betrays his loyalty to his race, the institution of slavery, and his duty as a jailer in order to allow Linda and her grandmother to visit Benjamin in jail while they are in disguise. The jailer isn't directly related to Benjamin's escape, but he is clearly sympathetic to Benjamin's family and recognizes their need to visit Benjamin even though he has been put in jail as a runaway.

This example represents a strategic move that Jacobs makes throughout her narrative's portrayal of sympathetic whites, male or female: the juxtaposition of this figure with an unsympathetic white figure. Discussing the way in which white readers would instinctively distrust texts written by black writers, both William Andrews and Frances Smith Foster argue that in order to compensate for what Robert Stepto calls the "distrust of the [white] reader" to read their texts as authentic, black writers, specifically slave narrators, would shape their texts accordingly⁶. Specifically, Andrews' discussion of how black writers worked with the awareness of distrust of their readers helps clarify the function and significance of Jacobs' juxtaposition of sympathetic and unsympa-

⁶ For their discussion of distrust of the reader, see Foster's "Resisting Incidents," pages 57-60 and Andrews' *To Tell a Free Story*, pages 2-3. Furthermore, this discussion leads into one of genre, specifically autobiography; however, the ways in which autobiography is defined in the contexts of slave narratives and reader distrust, as well as how Jacobs appropriated and shaped several genres in order to meet the needs of her narrative and her intention with its publication have been widely addressed. For example, see Foster, Gunning, Nudelman, and Smith.

thetic white figures throughout *Incidents*. Andrews' argument is based on the beginning of Jacobs' preface. She writes, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts" (1). In response to this, Andrews writes,

The white reader could have confidence in Jacobs's sincerity because she had promised to be sufficiently insincere, to fall sufficiently far short of the facts, to prove that she had written no fiction. This is only a sample of the ways in which early Afro-American autobiography fictionalized itself to adapt to the contradictory and perverse social system and communication situation that white culture enforced over the genre and the people who wrote in it. That Jacobs would not adapt to the paradox of her literary situation without exposing it with such ingenuous irony is a tribute to her truth-telling in the midst of her bold assertion that she had not told the truth. (26-27).

It is my understanding, then, that the frequency with which sympathetic white figures appear in conjunction with unsympathetic whites, to varying degrees, is not merely a direct recreation of Jacobs' experiences in slavery. Rather, this move seems to signify a deliberate attempt on Jacobs' part not only to account for the very real presence and influence of sympathetic white men and women in slaves' lives, but to do so

without romanticizing what might be considered an inauthentic representation of slavery by her white readers. Depicting a figure like the jailer, who is sympathetic to Benjamin and his family, in conjunction with the white men, who perceive and treat Benjamin as mere property, enables Jacobs to appeal to her readers without arousing their suspicions that such sympathetic figures could not have been notably abundant in the South. Representing white figures in this way allows Jacobs to shape her experiences in order to gain and perhaps maintain the trust of her readers as these depictions are not exaggerated so as to seem inauthentic. Furthermore, it's important to keep in mind that the unsympathetic characters in Jacobs' narrative are of course not limited to the minor figures as in the example of the jailer, but include figures such as Dr. and Mrs. Flint. Regarding characterizations such as these major unsympathetic whites, Andrews explains that "Many slave narrators were aware of the racist and nationalistic biases that made the average northern reader suspect any black person who characterized southern whites as barbarous and inhuman" (26). Perhaps, then, this method of juxtaposition also enables Jacobs' readers to accept her depiction of the unsympathetic whites as well.

The next sympathetic white figure in the narrative is responsible for Benjamin's escape to the North. After being released from jail, Benjamin is sold to a slavetrader, but he runs away to Baltimore. Here, he is encountered by "his old master's next door neighbor" (24). Jacobs writes, "[Benjamin]

thought it was all over with him now; but it proved otherwise. That man was a miracle. He possessed a goodly number of slaves, and yet was not quite deaf to that mystic clock, whose ticking is rarely heard in the slaveholder's breast" (24). This man does not exercise loyalty to his fellow slaveholder, Benjamin's master; rather, he advises Benjamin to go north as soon as possible in order to avoid being recognized by other men of his community and returned to the slavetrader. Additionally, this man offers to comfort Aunt Martha and tell her that he has seen her son. Jacobs refers to this man as "a gem ~ a gem worthy of a purer setting" (25) and explains that he was actually born in the North and married a woman from the South. Perhaps Jacobs is explicit about the fact that this man was not a Southerner by birth in an effort to appeal to her Northern readers, both male and female, by suggesting that Northerners may in fact be innately kinder or more compassionate than Southerners. While this man did move to the South, Jacobs perhaps understands the efficacy of enabling her male readers specifically to identify with this man originally from the North whose sentiments remain similar to those of the North, but whose duties to his wife lead him to become a slaveowner himself in order to provide for his family. Likewise, Jacobs' female readers in the North would perhaps be struck by such sympathy and kindness of this white man, regardless of the fact that he is a slaveholder-implicated in the very institution of slavery itself, this man chooses to help Benjamin, a runaway slave, in his escape. This might suggest to Jacobs' readers that if people who are

directly involved in the very institution of slavery are themselves sympathetic to the plight of the slave and willing to risk their own well-being in order to help the slave, then people of the free states should without question join in this compassion as well and take action to help the slaves.

Jacobs' depiction of how Nat Turner's insurrection generated fear among slaveholders and therefore led to a surprise house raid similarly includes a brief, yet significant, description of a sympathetic white man who aids Linda and her grandmother in a particular time of need. Linda describes the experience of having her grandmother's house raided: "I entertained no positive fears about our household, because we were in the midst of white families who would protect us" (64). This is in opposition to many other black people, who Jacobs describes as "helpless" and subject to being "terrified] and torment[ed]" by "these unfeeling wretches" who raid the houses (64). After the soldiers enter Aunt Martha's house and begin to raid "every box, trunk, closet, and corner," Jacobs writes, "At that moment I saw a white gentleman who was friendly to us; and I called to him, and asked him to have the goodness to come in and stay till the search was over. He readily complied" (64-65). The presence of this man "emboldened" Aunt Martha, and he is described as their "protector" (65). In fact, Jacobs explains, "His entrance into the house brought in the captain of the company" (65). Not only is this another example then of Jacobs' juxtaposition of a sympathetic white man with unsympathetic white men, but this also suggests that the presence of the kind neighbor presents

somewhat of a threat to the captain. He and his soldiers could no longer abuse their presence in the house as they might feel at liberty to do without the presence of a white man, presumably of a class above the soldiers⁷. Furthermore, perhaps the entrance of the white neighbor into the house on the behalf of Linda and her grandmother provoked the captain to enter the house in order to make sure that this man did not intend to "help" the blacks in any other form than his mere presence.

This protector/protectee relationship between the white neighbor and Linda and her family, which can potentially be used to describe each instance of help from a sympathetic white figure to a slave, clearly perpetuates a power hierarchy between whites and blacks in the South. Jacobs juxtaposes the captain, who exercises tremendous power over the blacks in this particular situation, with the neighbor, who exercises a different kind of power, that which protects the blacks, slave or free, and intimidates the lower class whites to a certain degree. Therefore, through the representation of the sympathetic white man who becomes a protector for Linda and her grandmother, Jacobs offers her readers, male and female, a sense of the power that they could essentially exercise over both the slaves they would potentially support as well as the slaveholders and slavetraders they would potentially oppose through their support of the slaves. This isn't to

⁷ The soldiers are described as "low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to experience a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders" (64).

suggest that Jacobs is attempting to depict sympathetic whites as exercising a different form of oppression than a figure like the captain or slaveholder, but rather to clarify that fundamentally embedded in a slave narrative such as this, in Jacobs' appeal to her readers, is a sense of reliance on the sympathetic white on the part of the slave. In order to represent her own experiences of slavery and the role of sympathetic whites, both male and female, Jacobs cannot ignore the power hierarchy embedded in this relationship; rather, she can draw on it to further strengthen her appeal to her readers who may be more inclined to relate to Jacobs' depiction of sympathetic whites if they are able to perceive the level of control that they will maintain as supporters of slaves.

These examples of sympathetic white men help clarify that Jacobs did not limit the appeal to her readers, female and male, to portrayals of sympathetic white women. Recognizing these and other such figures indicates how Jacobs uses a strategy of sympathy to appeal to both female and male readers through both the readers' imagination as well as the mediating device of the sympathetic white male characters. In fact, she continues to portray several other sympathetic white males throughout her narrative who play various, yet crucial, roles in the lives of Linda and her family. These figures include the new clergyman who is described as being "loved" by the blacks (71), and the man who perhaps inadvertently warns Linda that her children are to be "broke in" by Dr. Flint, but who is nevertheless described as having "always

manifested friendly feelings towards [Linda's] grandmother and her family" and who directly expresses his sympathy towards Linda (94). Such figures also include the slavetrader who shows sympathy towards Linda's brother, William, and subsequently aids Linda's children (107); the captain of the ship that brings Linda to Philadelphia, who all the while treats her and Fanny as "respectfully" as if they were "white ladies" (158); and Lawyer Hopper who, upon the request of Mrs. Bruce, unquestioningly helps Linda in the North (180-182).

It's important to address that these figures, in addition to the examples discussed earlier, as well as the sympathetic white women in the text, are not strictly located in either the South or the North. Rather than attempt to appeal to her Northern readers with sympathetic whites only in the South or only in the North, Jacobs blurs the boundary between these two geographic locations. This move reflects the motivation behind Jacobs' juxtaposition of sympathetic and unsympathetic whites discussed earlier, and I would argue that both moves are in fact inextricably linked. I argued before that the juxtaposition of sympathetic and unsympathetic whites represents Jacobs' anticipation of the distrust of her readers who might doubt the notable presence of sympathetic whites in the slave states. Similarly, Jacobs' depiction of both categories of white figures in the North strengthens this appeal to her readers with a realistic portrayal of slavery. Jacobs does not depict all Northerners as sympathetic to the plight of the slave; doing so would undermine the very prem-

ise of her narrative as it is intended to arouse Northerners to recognize the realities of slavery, which inherently assumes that they are not already familiar with these realities and therefore are not all "sympathetic." Neither does Jacobs depict all Northerners as unsympathetic to slavery as this wouldn't represent her real experiences and it would lessen her ability to appeal to her readers. This move to blur the boundaries between the North and South, therefore, indicates Jacobs' attempt to gain the trust of her readers by representing a reasonable picture of the North regarding the combination of kindness and racism of the very white men and women to whom her narrative is addressed.

Mr. Sands

My reading of *Incidents* has up until this point been based on the assumption that within the narrative, Jacobs develops a clearly defined line between sympathetic and unsympathetic whites. However, a discussion of how white males function in Jacobs' slave narrative would be significantly incomplete without addressing the role of Mr. Sands, a major figure in the text whose complexity seems to resist a clear reading in these terms and therefore complicates this distinction between sympathetic and unsympathetic white figures. It is clear throughout the text that Jacobs intends to depict Sands as ultimately failing her and their children, as a source of overwhelming fear and anxiety, as untrustworthy and unreliable, and as acting on his own behalf rather than on that of

Linda's ~ as an unsympathetic white male. It is my understanding, however, that regardless of these descriptions that place Sands in the same category as a figure such as Dr. Flint, Sands is fundamentally a sympathetic figure. I will argue that Sands is a sympathetic figure who does not understand the true plight of the slave, and therefore does not see clearly that his behavior is not as helpful to Linda and her family as he perceives it to be. This reading of Sands suggests that his function in the text represents Jacobs' attempt to emphasize to her readers, female and male, the importance of understanding "what Slavery really is" and therefore the clarity and urgency with which they must act on behalf of the slave so as not ultimately to fail the slaves as Sands is described as doing.

Jacobs' first description of Sands aligns him with any of the other sympathetic white men Linda and her family encounter in the narrative. In fact, he is described as one "among others" who "had obtained some knowledge of [Linda's] circumstances" and therefore became interested in helping her (54). Significantly, what distinguishes Sands from others is his notable growing interest in Linda and his subsequent persistence in helping her. Jacobs writes, "He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old" (54). Jacobs' emphasis of her age here complicates an initial reading of Sands as sympathetic. While it may be read as Jacobs' effort to emphasize the seriousness of her situation at the hands of Dr. Flint, it may also be read as her emphasis of

Sands' complicity in an affair with such a young girl. Regardless of Jacobs' intention here, her recognition of her age nevertheless raises suspicions regarding Sands' willingness to become her lover. These suspicions are complicated, however, through Linda's description of the affair as due to her desire to infuriate Dr. Flint and ultimately position Sands to purchase her and their future children from him. Referring to Sands' attention to Linda, Jacobs writes, "Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be the object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave. [...] It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (54-55). Linda's own acknowledgement of her motivation to pursue the affair with Sands suggests that he sympathizes with Linda's plight to such an extent that he overlooks what might be considered the inappropriateness of their affair due to her age. Furthermore, this demonstrates his fundamental sympathy for Linda in that he wanted to help her in the only way she thought possible.

Interestingly, however, Sands' explanation of his role in the actual affair and his motives for participating in the affair are unclear throughout the narrative as Jacobs does not provide much discussion of his role in the affair or in the decision to have it⁸. When Linda's grandmother asks Sands why

⁸ See Andrews for a discussion of how Jacobs avoids details regarding the actual affair between Linda and Sands.

he engaged in the affair, Jacobs explains that he avoids answering: "She asked him why he could not have left her one ewe lamb, -whether there were not plenty of slaves who did not care about character, -he made no answer; but he spoke kind and encouraging words. He promised to care for my child, and to buy me, be the conditions what they might" (58). While Sands is not ultimately responsible for Linda's freedom, he does attempt to purchase their children from Dr. Flint. When Sands' offer to buy Benny and Ellen from Dr. Flint is rejected, however, Sands conspires with a slavetrader to buy them with the agreement that Sands will secretly purchase them from the slavetrader. Similar to other sympathetic white men throughout *Incidents*, this demonstrates Sands' betrayal of loyalty to Dr. Flint and to his race, demonstrating the risk that he takes in order to help keep his promise to Linda⁹.

As the narrative progresses, Jacobs repeatedly refers to Sands' promises to free their children and to her subsequent anxieties and frustration as times pass without seeing this promise coming to fruition. While Jacobs clearly bases her understanding of Sands on the fact that he doesn't free Ellen and Benny once he insists on his efforts to do so, I would argue that Sands naïvely assumes that all of the situations in which he places Linda's family are in fact better than their

⁹ Additionally, the slavetrader here is another sympathetic figure who Jacobs describes as "hav[ing] some feeling" (107). Jacobs writes, "When he heard the story of my children, he was willing to aid them in getting out of Dr. Flint's power, even without charging the customary fee" (107).

lives would be without his intervention. Therefore, he does not understand the immediacy with which Linda asks him to free their children. In fact, throughout the narrative, Sands attempts to provide a sense of protection and sympathy for Linda and their children, as well as for Linda's brother, William, and her uncle Phillip. While Linda perceives such protection and sympathy as insufficient, Sands' behavior nevertheless demonstrates his characterization as a sympathetic white male with whom Jacobs enables her readers to identify.

Sands' purchase of Ellen and Benny from the slavetrader enables them to live with Aunt Martha instead of with the Flints. Additionally, when Sands gets married, he suggests that his wife and her sister could provide better opportunities for Benny and Ellen in the North than would be available to them living with Linda's grandmother in the South. Although Jacobs refers to Sands' behavior here as that of her family's "new master," his argument seems rather logical (138). Sands argues that "The children are free. I have never intended to claim them as slaves. Linda may decide their fate. In my opinion, they had better be sent to the north. I don't think they are quite safe here. Dr. Flint boasts that they are still in his power. He says they were his daughter's property, and as she was not of age when they were sold, the contract is not legally binding" (138). While this may be interpreted as Sands' attempt to take advantage of Linda's circumstance and his fundamental ability to make the decision for her, his explanation regarding the Flints is indeed true, and so it isn't

as though his argument for the children to go to the North is based on questionable ground. After Linda learns that Ellen had been given from Mrs. Sands' sister to Mr. Sands' cousin, Jacobs writes, "Mr. Sands had not kept his promise to emancipate them. I had also been deceived about Ellen. What security had I with regard to Benjamin? I felt that I had none" (166). Sands' perception of their children's lives in the North would clearly have been different from Linda's, and so it's unclear that Sands was deliberately causing suffering for Linda or her family in situations such as these.

Regarding Linda's brother, William, Sands took him as a servant to the North intending to provide William with a better situation than he would find in the South, but Sands also benefits from this situation as he would have William at his service. William ends up running away from Sands, but nevertheless maintains that "Mr. Sands had always treated him kindly, and that he had tried to do his duty to him faithfully. But ever since he was a boy, he had longed to be free" (135). Likewise, Sands describes a letter that William wrote to him after he ran away: "[William] hoped God would always bless me, and reward me for my kindness; that he was not unwilling to serve me, but he wanted to be a free man; and that if I thought he did wrong, he hoped I would forgive him" (136). Regardless of these accounts by both William and Sands, Linda argues that Sands was clearly abusing his power over William and avoiding his promise to free him. Again, not completely sympathetic to the fact that serving a man like Sands in contrast to being a slave to a man like Dr.

Flint is still undesirable for William, Sands claims that "I intended to give him his freedom in five years. He might have trusted me" (136).

This situation, in conjunction with that of Benny and Ellen, suggests that Sands has honest intentions; in fact, his perception throughout the text of his role in the lives of Linda and her family ~ as much as Jacobs reveals ~ is one of protection and trust. He clearly reads his relationship with Linda and her family as one of affection and support, yet his actions prove ultimately failing to Linda. While it may seem that, to an extent, Sands does perhaps take advantage of his position from which he can prolong emancipating Benny, Ellen, and William as he sees fit, this does not deny all of the ways in which he does attempt to improve their lives. As many of the other white men addressed throughout this reading provide some form of support or protection and are nevertheless involved in the institution of slavery, it's unnecessary that Sands unconditionally sympathize with or risk his life in order to be considered one of the many sympathetic figures that Jacobs develops in her narrative. His undeniable acts of sympathy towards Linda and her family, including those described above as well as the time he spent with his children and the letters he continually sent to Linda's family, demonstrate the importance of understanding Sands as part of Jacobs' efforts to further appeal to her readers. The complexity of Sands' relationship with the slaves in the text perhaps reflects Jacobs' attempt to enable her readers to understand the clarity of perception with which one must act on

behalf of the slave.

This reading of how Sands functions in *Incidents*, as well as the many other sympathetic white male figures throughout the narrative, clearly reveals the complexity of Jacobs' efforts to appeal to her readers, female and male. In conjunction with her development of the sympathetic white female throughout the narrative, Jacobs' development of the sympathetic white male as a mediating device enables her readers to sympathize with the slave without diminishing the slave's actual experiences of suffering. Understanding the ways in which Jacobs strategically depicts sympathetic whites throughout *Incidents*, including the juxtaposition with unsympathetic whites, the power inherent in the "protector" role, and the blurring of boundaries between the North and the South, illuminates the significance of Jacobs' depiction of figures outside of her race and therefore provides a new understanding of this key antebellum slave narrative.

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