CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet A. Jacobs · *1861 · original English text*

I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. Jacobs's 1861 narrative, written by herself, is a complete testimony of girlhood, hiding, motherhood, and a hard flight. It is for older students, and it must be taught with gravity.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it cost a young woman to tell the truth about slavery as it was done to her, and what kind of freedom is left after years of hiding?

"I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away."

The opening of the narrative

The hosted text is Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself (1861, PG #11030), complete. The opening is exact, including "till" and "skilful" later in the same passage. Spelling irregularities of the original are retained. The book includes pursuit, sexual coercion, a long concealment, and a flight; for older students. Teach these things with gravity and respect; do not sensationalize them, and do not skip them. This is Jacobs's own telling, not a later novelization.

KEY CHARACTERS

Harriet Jacobs
The writer, who tells a girlhood, a hiding, and a flight in her own name.

the family of her childhood
The father, the grandmother, and the household of the first six years.

the children
The son and daughter whose danger is part of the long middle.

the pursuers
The master and the power that would not let her go.

SIX YEARS OF HAPPY CHILDHOOD

> *"I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away."*
>
> The opening

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Six Years of Childhood

THE OPENING

She was born a slave, but did not know it until six years of happy childhood had passed. The first knowledge of her condition is a fall from a childhood that had seemed safe.

- The first sentence is exact in both witnesses.
- The father, a carpenter, is in the next lines.
- The book is written by herself, as the title page says.

> *"I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away."*
>
> The opening

02

A Girlhood Under Threat

THE EARLY CHAPTERS

A new master, a household that is not safe, and the hard choices of a young woman who would not be what she was told to be. The telling is already a moral act.

- The coercion must be taught with gravity, for older students; do not sensationalize it, and do not skip it.
- Jacobs's own voice is the text; do not replace it with a later paraphrase.
- Cite this typography, including till and the retained spellings.

03

Motherhood, and a Hiding Place

THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

Children, a long concealment, and a life lived in a space too small for a life. The years hidden are the book's long middle, not a brief episode.

- The concealment is endurance, not a trick of plot.
- The children's danger is part of the testimony.
- For older students; teach with respect.

04

A Flight, and a North That Is Not Simple

THE LATER CHAPTERS

The escape, and a freedom that is still not simple in the North. The book will not pretend that crossing a line ends the story.

- The North is not a tidy paradise in this telling.
- Keep Jacobs's own close; do not invent a softer one.
- The narrative is complete in this file.

05

Written by Herself

THE HOSTED FILE

PG #11030 and the site EPUB are this complete 1861 book. Transcriber notes on spelling are not Jacobs. Quote the narrative.

- Written by herself, 1861, complete.
- For older students; a testimony, not a novelization.
- Quote stretches that appear in both witnesses.

A Girlhood Taken | A Hard Telling | Concealment | Motherhood | A Costly Freedom

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself (1861, Project Gutenberg #11030), complete. The opening is exact: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away." Spelling irregularities of the original (including till, skilful) are retained. Transcriber notes are not Jacobs.
2. For older students. The book includes pursuit, sexual coercion, a long concealment, and a flight. Teach these things with gravity and respect; do not sensationalize them, and do not skip them. This is Jacobs's own telling, not a later novelization.
3. Quote stretches that appear in both the Gutenberg text and the site EPUB.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #11030, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/incidents-in-the-life-of-a-slave-girl/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.