
Sentimental Sources of Harriet Jacobs' Life Story

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Abstract

Analyses of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* have frequently emphasized the ways in which Jacob's narrative constitutes a radical departure from preceding models of how to construct a narrative representing slavery, escape from slavery and the fugitive's experiences after slavery. I am not seeking to contradict but to supplement these, by exploring how at the same time as Jacobs' text introduces radical departures from existing models it also consistently incorporates the stylistic traits of sentimentalized sensationalism in order to drive home as effectively as possible the ways in which slavery is perverted, violent, oppressive and exploitative. Jacobs is always prepared to divert from her life story in *Incidents* strategically to garner up sure-footedly more emotional traction and we need to be alert to the consequential intertextual exchanges. But this means *Incidents* is not and cannot be read as simple a life story that constitutes some sort of radical departure from preceding models. It draws upon and incorporates these, as well as revising or running counter to them, in a series of complex, interconnected intertextual exchanges. My paper will explore some of the dimensions of these exchanges.

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