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Harriet Jacobs: Using Online Slave Narratives in the Classroom

Cheryl Mason Bolick and Meghan M. McGlinn

The teacher of a local high school U.S. history course recently took her students to the computer lab. She had selected a series of online primary sources for her students to analyze. This teacher believes in providing students with opportunities to interpret and analyze online historical texts so students may develop their own, meaningful understanding of the past. Her students were eager to work in the lab and immediately started on their assignments. After a while, however, she started to notice flagging motivation and that students were sneaking off to "Ask Jeeves" and "Google" for help. Worse, their interpretations of the primary documents read online demonstrated only minimal understanding. What had gone wrong? In the past, her students all exhibited technological savvy and had regular experience using the Internet for school and personal uses. Why did this online learning activity seemingly backfire?

Teachers most interested in a constructivist approach to historical instruction like the one above often use new technology to provide realistic, inquiry-based learning situations for their students. Recent research in social studies learning has de-emphasized student memorization of facts and text-based instruction in favor of engaging students in historical inquiry.[1] Milson reports "the research base has indicated that students learn history most effectively when they are engaged in asking historical questions, collecting and analyzing historical sources, and determining historical significance."[2] As such, teacher educators and classroom teachers are very concerned that social studies students actively participate in the development of their understanding.

New technology provides an increasing array of tools with which teachers can present realistic learning situations that engage their students. Through the Internet, teachers and students can access a wider variety of social studies information such as primary sources, maps, videos, photographs, discussion boards, and much more in order to create inquiry-based activities.

As the nature of social studies instruction evolves due to the integration of technology, so too is student literacy undergoing major changes—students now need to develop the skills necessary to use online texts meaningfully in educational settings. This literacy includes the ability to not only locate appropriate hypertexts but also to critically read, analyze, evaluate and make inferences about these texts.

Too often, educators assume that the younger generation, first referred to as the "Net Generation," possess the prerequisite computer skills necessary for computer-assisted instruction. Teachers especially need to realize that, while students may be able to navigate Web pages and search engines or play realistic games with ease, they are not always able to transfer this knowledge to school-related tasks. Tancock, for instance, points out the multiple literacy skills required of students to complete a Web-based project.[3] These included reading and writing skills such as skimming, scanning, interpreting and summarizing, and technology and communication skills such as using search engines and sharing findings. Teacher guidance is therefore essential to the development of student literacy in the use of online resources. By overtly coaching students in order to help them develop these skills, teachers can avoid many of the frustrations related to computer-assisted instruction and, over time, students will be able to more independently use hypertext to develop social studies understanding.

While educators cannot assume that student knowledge of computers means content learning becomes easier for students online, teachers need not be dissuaded from using technology. In order for students to effectively use hypertexts in the social studies classroom, teachers must select appropriate online materials and coach their students on how to use computer-based research materials. By using online primary sources while helping students learn to analyze and interpret hypertext, teachers achieve the dual objectives of building on student understanding of social studies while aiding them to develop literacy skills useful in today's information age.

Documenting the American South

The University of North Carolina's *Documenting the American South* project is one example of an appropriate

digital library that can be used in the social studies classroom. The library houses more than 1,000 full-text, searchable primary resources available at no cost to users around the world. *Documenting the American South* is comprised of six sections: First-Person Narratives of the American South; Library of Southern Literature; North American Slave Narratives; The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865; The Church in the Southern Black Community; The North Carolina Experience, beginnings to 1940; and North Carolinians and the Great War. The project incorporates materials from a broad range of Southern experience; it includes the historical and social experiences of citizens from all social classes and walks of life. Materials for inclusion are selected in consultation with a board of faculty advisors from The University of North Carolina's College of Arts and Sciences. All material is made available for free from the university library sponsored website: docsouth.unc.edu.

The University of North Carolina's library opened *Documenting the American South* in 1994 with the *North American Slave Narratives* project. Project organizers anticipated that the audience for this and the subsequent projects would primarily be university and college-level researchers and faculty. A review of over 1,500 email messages sent to the site since its inception revealed that other audiences are also making use of the site, including K-12 teachers, librarians, and students who find the site a valuable resource for bringing primary materials to the classroom.[4]

The majority of teachers and school librarians who contacted *Documenting the American South* wrote to thank the university for making these resources available and shared teaching suggestions of how they incorporated the project into their instruction. One classroom teacher commented:

> I am a social studies teacher who greatly enjoys your site. I find it invaluable for my reading of 19th-century African American writers and other notables. This site has greatly increased my knowledge and understanding of the era and the slave narrative. For example, a little more than five years ago, I read an excerpt of the *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave*. Several months ago, I read the entire narrative. I was aware of some of his accomplishments, but through your site I have read more of his works and now understand his true genius. I live and teach in Indiana, and these online works are not readily available in this area. For me to have the opportunity to read these works, I would have to travel great distances, if it were not for your site.[5]

The student emails to *Documenting the American South* also reveal great appreciation for making the resources available. It appears that many of the students who access the site use it to conduct research for school projects and to supplement the resources they have available in their communities. One student's comments highlights the overall sentiment:

> Thanks a lot for making this website. I am working on a research project for school (high school) and I needed this poem, "Summer Bower" by Henry Timrod. It must have taken a long time to document all this information. This is really what the Internet is about, though. The availability of quality information.[6]

With teacher guidance, these materials can enhance student understanding of the historical past and encourage the growth of student literacy skills aligned with the demands of the Information Age. However, the concept of the digital library—an electronic system for archiving, retrieving, analyzing and manipulating large collections of digitally formatted materials—is a new and largely unfamiliar technology to K-12 students. As discussed earlier, students may easily "get lost" within digital libraries and become distracted from the learning objectives. Many of the online documents provided in this collection may prove difficult for students still developing the necessary literacy skills to analyze and interpret hypertext. Hence, it is essential that teachers coach their students through online resources using appropriate pedagogy.

The Life of Harriet Jacobs

Elsewhere in this issue of Social Education (see pp. 221-25), Hicks and Doolittle (2003) present the SCIM-C strategy of historical analysis. This approach can help teachers structure activities that guide students through the analysis of digital historical documents. To illustrate how this strategy can be used, we have selected one resource from *Documenting the American South* that connects with many states' standard course of study in U.S. history or state history, especially related to slavery and the antebellum era. The document we selected, *Harriet Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is one of the most accessed and compelling documents from the digital library.

Harriet Jacobs was born in 1813, the daughter of two slaves in Edenton, N.C. According to Jacobs, "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away." Her owner, Margaret Horniblow, treated Jacobs relatively kindly and taught her to read and write; as a little girl, Jacobs played with the white children of the family.[7] This all ended when Jacobs turned six and Horniblow died. Jacobs then became the "property" of Dr. James Norcon, Horniblow's son-in-law, and her life changed dramatically.

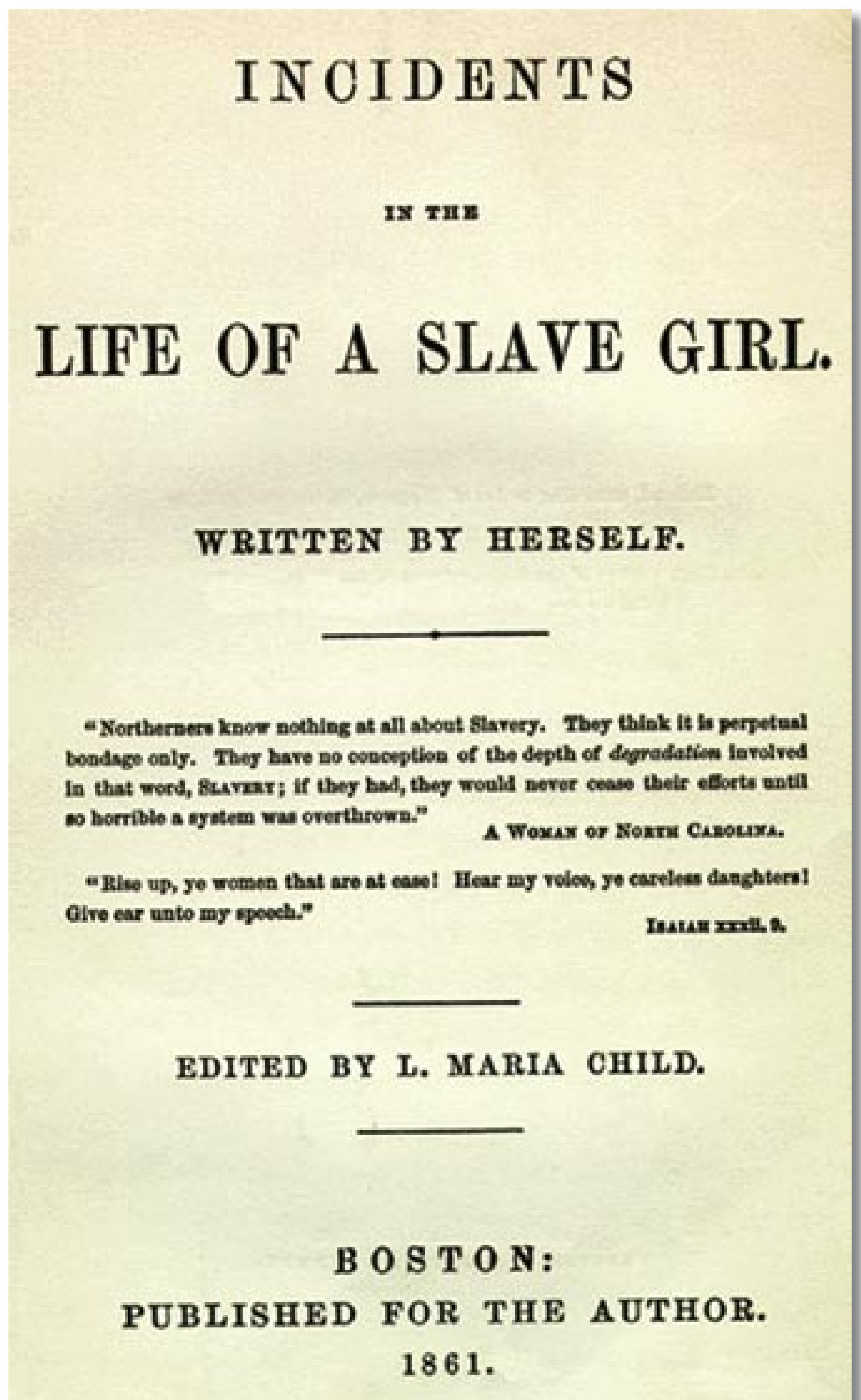
This narrative illustrates the devastating impact slavery had on the family unit. In her writings, Jacobs highlights detrimental slave experiences such as the loss of childhood, the inability to choose partners, and the separation of families. Further, Jacobs's story provides insight into the particular struggles faced by women. Jacobs explains, "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men."[8] Not only were mothers separated from their children, but female slaves, like Jacobs,

suffered sexual abuse at the hands of their owners. Her text provides a moral indictment of the institution of slavery.

In order to escape the abuse, Jacobs hid in her grandmother's narrow attic for seven years before making her escape to the North by boat in 1842. Once in New York, Jacobs reunited with her son and daughter and began to make a new life. Constantly under the threat of capture by her former master, Jacobs was forced to move several times.

It was during the time that she settled in Rochester, New York, that Jacobs began to consider making her story public. Perhaps due to the publication *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or perhaps due to her friendships with feminists and abolitionists, Jacobs began sending anonymous accounts of her experiences to *The New York Tribune*. Hoping that her story would help the abolitionist cause, she completed a manuscript under the editorship of Lydia Marie Child, a prominent abolitionist. Thanks to the help of wealthy supporters, the text was published in Boston in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War.

Since this slave narrative is lengthy and classroom teachers may not have time to explore it in its entirety, we suggest that teachers identify particular sections for classroom instruction. Teachers should select excerpts that are appropriate for the students they work with. For example, sections dealing with Jacobs's sexual victimization may be deemed inappropriate for younger students. In the example that follows, we begin with the title page, preface, and introduction and then move on to selections found deeper in the text. Jacobs's narrative is available online at docsouth.unc.edu/jacobs/menu.html.



INCIDENTS

IN THE

LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL.

WRITTEN BY HERSELF.

"Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown."

A WOMAN OF NORTH CAROLINA.

"Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech."

ISAIAH xxxii. 9.

EDITED BY L. MARIA CHILD.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR.
1861.

Using the SCIM-C Strategy to Study Harriet Jacobs

The SCIM-C strategy is based upon five phases: **S**ummarizing, **C**ontextualizing, **I**nferring, **M**onitoring, and **C**orroborating. We will use the guiding questions associated with each of the phases to explore *Harriet Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*

Summarizing and Contextualizing

To begin, students should identify the type of historical document, the subject and purpose of the document, and the intended audience. Students should then situate the document within the historical context. An examination of this slave narratives' title page (see above) reveals that it was a narrative published in book form the same year the Civil War broke out. The work was written by a slave girl and published in a northern town, Boston. The quotations on the title page lead the audience to predict that they are about to read a negative account of slavery.

When students move beyond the title page, to the Preface and Introduction, they perceive that the narrative will tell the story

of a former slave woman then living in the North. The woman tells her story in order to share the horrors of slavery as an institution in the South:

> I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But 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, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people![9]

It is at this point that teachers should guide students through selected excerpts of the narrative. For example, reading the section in which the author discusses Nat Turner's insurrection can help to contextualize the institution of slavery during this time period, "NOT far from this time Nat Turner's insurrection broke out; and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed when their slaves were so 'contented and happy!' But so it was." This rich narrative is packed with references to themes such as: family, love, childhood, resistance, escape, punishment, lack of fairness, and justification of slavery. Students can use the SCIM-C strategy to read their excerpts and discover more questions or areas for future research.

Inferring and Monitoring

The next phases of the strategy call upon students to revisit the facts and make inferences about the source. After reading through select sections of Jacobs's narrative, students begin to make deductions about the institution of slavery, in particular about the life of an enslaved black woman. Teachers could then prompt students to reflect upon how this narrative differs from narratives written by men found in the *Documenting the American South* collection. Students may also seek to learn more about the role women played in the abolitionist movement.

Teachers may lead students through inferring and monitoring with class discussion or through a variety of creative teaching activities. Sample teaching activities to guide students through the narrative include having students,

- design a picture book or a documentary PowerPoint in which they trace the life of Harriet Jacobs for young readers (this can also be done in the form of a timeline);
- create a newspaper that may have appeared during Jacobs's lifetime (either in the South or North)—include local news story, American news story, world news story, illustrations, advertisements, editorial letters, political cartoons, create a title/city/banner headline;
- write a letter from Jacobs that describes her situation at different points throughout her life;
- develop a series of questions they would like to ask Jacobs and then conduct research to hypothesize how she might respond;
- write a persuasive essay on a topic such as religion, exploring how it was used by Jacobs's slave owners to control slaves and exploring how it was used by slaves to subvert their owners;
- prepare a book review of *Life of a Slave Girl;* write a review that may have been published in a northern newspaper and a review that may have been published in a southern newspaper.

Corroborating

The final step in the SCIM-C strategy prompts students to substantiate their inferences with other sources. Here students look for contradictions and similarities across sources. Because Harriet Jacobs's narrative is one of numerous slave narratives available within the digital library, students may easily access additional narratives to compare and contrast. Because of the vast number of narratives in the collection, teachers may choose to select the narratives for students to compare and contrast. Teachers may also wish to select additional narratives to focus the students on specific themes or to insure the accessed narratives are appropriate. However, teachers may also allow students to develop their own line of inquiry and identify additional narratives to read.

At a workshop for teachers, Professor William Andrews highlighted a series of narratives that students may find interesting to read and corroborate their findings on Harriet Jacobs's narrative.[10] The first of these is by William Brown (1814–1884). Brown is remembered as a well-known abolitionist, lecturer and late nineteenth-century author. He traveled throughout Europe and the United States, often giving talks against slavery. His narratives are filled with rich accounts of the antislavery movement and life in the South. His final book, *My Southern Home: Or, the South and Its People*, was published in 1880.

George Moses Horton (ca. 1797–1883) was a North Carolina slave who was well known throughout the South as a poet. For a number of years, he lived close to the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There, he wrote and sold love poems for the students and faculty. He is also known for essays and poems he wrote on rural North Carolina.

Solomon Northrop (b. 1808) titled his narrative, *Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1852, From a Cotton Plantation near the Red River in Louisiana*. This account provides an introspective account of the life of a man who was once a freeman and was forced into slavery. Solomon had a number of owners. His narrative sheds light into the wide variance of how slave owners treated their slaves. Each of these described narratives, along with hundreds of others are located on the project website.

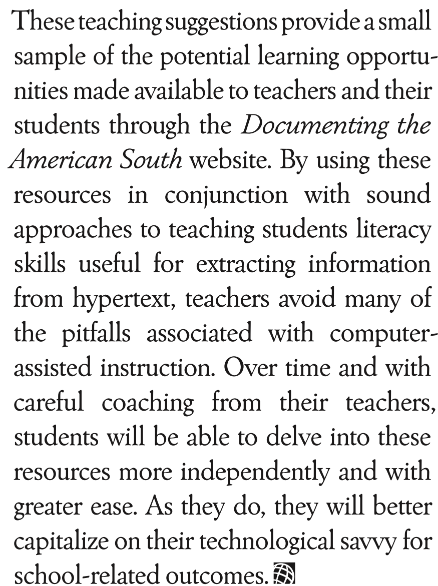
Teachers may also encourage students to corroborate their findings with sources beyond *Documenting the American South.* One suggestion is to have students read the picture book, *The Daring Escape*

of Ellen Craft, by Cathy Moore and Mary O'Keefe Young (illus.).[11] This picture book details the heroic escape of a married slave couple, Ellen and William Craft. The wife is very fair-skinned and presents herself as a white woman, and her husband as her personal slave. Students could compare Harriet Jacobs's escape with the Crafts' escape. Or they could compare the picture book account of the Crafts' escape with William Craft's personal slave narrative (online at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/menu.html).

Additional online resources of slave narratives include:

- The University of Virginia's Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology
  xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html
- The Library of Congress's Born in Slavery Project
  memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html
- The New Deal Network WPA Slave Narratives
  newdeal.feri.org/asn/asnoo.htm

Conclusion



These teaching suggestions provide a small sample of the potential learning opportunities made available to teachers and their students through the *Documenting the American South* website. By using these resources in conjunction with sound approaches to teaching students literacy skills useful for extracting information from hypertext, teachers avoid many of the pitfalls associated with computer-assisted instruction. Over time and with careful coaching from their teachers, students will be able to delve into these resources more independently and with greater ease. As they do, they will better capitalize on their technological savvy for school-related outcomes.

Notes

1. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, "Why Don't More History Teachers Engage Students in Interpretation?" *Social Education* 67, no. 6 (2003): 358-361; Matthew T. Downey and Linda Levstik, "Teaching and Learning History: The Research Base," *Social Education* 52, no. 6 (1988): 336-342; Stuart J. Foster and C.S Padgett, "Authentic Historical Inquiry in the Social Studies Classroom," *The Clearing House* 72, no. 6 (1999): 357-363.
2. Andrew J. Milson, "The Internet and Inquiry Learning: Integrating Medium and Method in a Sixth Grade Social Studies Classroom." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 3 (2002): 330-353.
3. Susan Tancock, "Reading, Writing, and Technology: A Healthy Mix in the Social Studies Curriculum," (International Reading Association, 2002), Available from www.readingonline.org. Retrieved November 15, 2003.
4. Joe A. Hewitt, "Keep Up the Good Work(s): Readers' Comments on *Documenting the American South*" (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002). Available online: docsouth.unc.edu/readers.pdf. Retrieved March 15, 2004.
5. *Ibid.*, 23.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.
7. William Andrews, *Biography of Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897)*, 2003 [cited March 15 2004]. Available from docsouth.unc.edu/jacobs/bio.html.
8. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself: Electronic Edition (1861)*. Chapel Hill, N.C. Available online at docsouth.unc.edu/jacobs/jacobs.html: 45.
9. *Ibid.*
10. William Andrews, "Documenting the American South: Using Slave Narratives in Instruction" (Paper presented at the Documenting the American South Summer Workshop, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003).
11. Cathy Moore and Mary O'Keefe Young (illus). *The Daring Escape of Ellen Craft*. (New York: Lerner Publishing Group, 2002).

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Cheryl Mason Bolick *is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her writing and research focuses on integration of technology into social studies education.* Meghan McGlinn *is a doctoral student in the Culture, Curriculum, and Change program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.*

2 [Harriet Jacobs],Incidentsin the Life of a Slave Girl. Writtenby Herself.Ed. American Literature, Volume 53, Number 3, November I98I.Â Her briefinvolvement withHarrietBeecherStowewas decisive WhenJacobsfirstagreedto a public in thegenesisof Incidents. accountofherlife,shedidnotplantowriteit herself, buttoenlist a dictated narrative. To thisend, Stowe'said inhelpingherproduce JacobsaskedPostto approachUncleTom'screator withthesuggestion thatJacobs be invited toStowe'shomeso theycouldbecome inthepapersoftheauthor's acquainted. Harriet Jacobs was enslaved from birth in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Her father, Elijah Knox, was an enslaved biracial house carpenter controlled by Andrew Knox. Her mother, Delilah Horniblow, was an enslaved Black woman controlled by a local tavern owner.Â The publication made Jacobs the first woman to author a slave narrative in the U.S. Prominent white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child helped Jacobs edit and publish her book in 1861. However, Child asserted that she did little to change the text, saying â€œI don't think I altered 50 words in the whole volume." Douglass's and Jacob's slave narratives deal with the reconstruction of identity. The recreation of Frederick Douglass's own identity is seen as an â€œargument for an end to slavery's denial of individuality and creativityâ€ (Stone 66). This process of reconstructing identity is closely connected with the depiction of gender. Thus, the main focus of this term paper is placed on the formation of gender identity in the two slave narratives.Â Therefore, Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl will also be analyzed in terms of motherhood and interdependence.Â Her master forces her to listen to him, using inappropriate language as means to make her suffer: â€œFor my master, [...] had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire.â€ (Incidents 215).