



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOXÍA INGLESA E
ALEMÁ

Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick
Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, in
the History of American Slave Narratives.

Ángela Fernández Fuentes

Supervised by Dr. Patricia Fra López

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Literatura en Lingua Inglesa

2018/2019

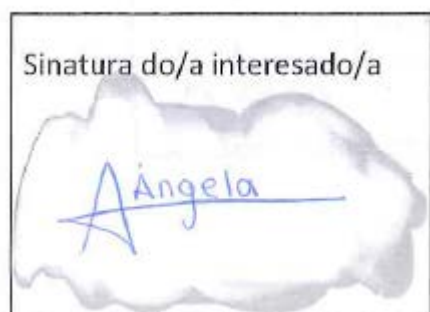


FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOXÍA INGLESA E
ALEMÁ

Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick
Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, in
the History of American Slave Narratives.

Ángela Fernández Fuentes



Supervised by Dr. Patricia Fra López

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Literatura en Lingua Inglesa

2018/2019

Table of contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Repeated motifs	10
2.1 Self –assertion	10
2.2 Dehumanization	14
3. Gender	21
3.1 Gendered treatment	21
3.2 The aim of narratives regarding gender	26
3.2.1 Becoming a virtuous woman regardless of The Cult of True Womanhood...	27
3.2.2 How a slave became a self-made man	35
4. Conclusion	42
5. Works Cited	45

Formulario de delimitación de título e resumo

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2018/2019

APELIDOS E NOME:	FERNÁNDEZ FUENTES, ÁNGELA
GRAO EN:	LENGUA Y LITERATURA INGLESA
(NO CASO DE MODERNAS) ITINERARIO EN:	
TITOR/A:	PATRICIA FRA LÓPEZ
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	ESTUDIOS NORTEAMERICANOS: LITERATURA, CULTURA, HISTORIA

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: Harriet Ann Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* in the History of American Slave narratives

Harriet Ann Jacobs is considered as one of the most influential African American women writers. The publication of her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) caused an unprecedented scandal in the traditional American literature due to the hard and detailed descriptions of the African American slave routines and punishments. Likewise, sixteen years before, Frederick Douglass and his narrative *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (1845) used literature not only to provide a description of the slave abuses but also to fight for the freedom and rights of African American people.

The present study intends to analyse these two texts that had a huge impact during the abolitionist period. The two narratives try to make the reading public aware of the situation of African American slaves and claim that they should be equal citizens to white people. To assess their contribution to the vindication of black people's rights in the Southern States I will analyse the main topics in slave narratives (sex, abuse, religion, family relationships, social rights, etc.) and some repeated motifs (the loss of innocence, dehumanization of individuals, the ongoing abuses, the quest for freedom, etc) that allow a detailed gender comparison between the two experiences.

The analysis of Jacobs and Douglass autobiographies is methodologically informed by the authors' experiences and their fight for social rights that developed much later for black people in the Southern States than in the rest of United States. During the course of this essay many authors whose opinions upon this subject are valued will be considered and featured in order to study the impact, reflection and controversy of gender, race and justice between readers

SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

Santiago de Compostela, 6 de novembro de 2018.

Sinatura do/a interesado/a 	Visto e prace (sinatura do/a titor/a) 	Aprobado pola Comisión de Títulos de Grao con data 30 NOV. 2018 Selo da Facultade de Filoloxía 
---	--	--

1. Introduction

Every slave narrative written by ex-slaves along the era of slavery in the United States had a huge impact during the abolitionist movement. Slave narratives were a symbol of progression and resistance, but they especially meant a connection between literacy and the search for self identity, the opportunity to have a voice and therefore the option of freedom. Literacy gave slaves the possibility of expression, of having an identity, and becoming someone else rather than a mere black slave. There is no doubt that literacy is linked to the process of constructing the self. African Americans were deprived of taking decisions about their family, future or even thinking for themselves. They were trapped in a system in which white Americans established themselves as a superior race; they were the ones who decided over the others and the ones who ruled the “exceptions”. For this reason the slave trade was identified as an amazingly prosperous business. It involved personal advantages and benefits to masters at a minimal cost, unlike for the Africans who were perceived as lesser beings. Their living conditions were compared to animals because they were shaped into moral behaviour and a state of mind that were advantageous for the master but damaging to the slave himself. They were treated as emotionless, commodities or properties in order to maintain the masters’ power. Slaveholders realized that the commerce of human beings, the destruction of self-identity and the prohibition of access to an educational system, as occurred during the slavery period, was the solution to obtaining personal benefits through the exploitation of others. The trade of African Americans was a way of capitalizing on prostitution and forced labour. Merchants were aware that the slave trade did not bring about any complaint from whites because it increased their wealth at while giving those black people who were considered inferior and not potentially equal to whites “the chance of having better living conditions”. Black people were discouraged from defining their self. It is known that the expectations society demanded highly involved the

development of the self. In the case of men, they were expected to be strong and virile while women were expected to be feminine and pure. However, during bondage identities were impossible to acquire due to the horrifying experiences that masters forced them to live. In the case of any free man or woman, whose identity was already formed, when captured and turned into slaves, they were re-educated to become no one just like the other slaves. Masters destroyed their identities by not permitting them to think, feel or even expect. Their voice was denied because voice is what defines an individual. They were not given the option of expressing themselves as whites were assumed to be the superior majority. African Americans were set up by limitations regarding their race, gender and the way society perceived them, so their search for self identity was quite hard. Identity is formed by society's behaviour towards an individual, his/her experiences and the way people are perceived by others. So their identity was constructed by others and social standards; it was not created by themselves. It was not until they obtained their freedom when they could draw their identity. Thus Jacobs and Douglass attempted to describe the seeking for their identity while escaping from the ties of slavery. They tried to demonstrate how the oppression of the slavery system destroyed the identity of individuals, and how their revolt allowed them to rule their self. They depicted how the living and working conditions of African Americans developed the minds of slaves, always depending on the masters' will. They were contemplated as properties that could be sold, humiliated, hurt or even murdered. The standardization of black inferiority was so believed that society firmly established laws that did not penalize the cruelty they were exposed to, quite the opposite, these laws favoured whites and were even more harmful to blacks to the point of turning them into objects. The law that empowered masters the most was the *Fugitive Slave Act* in 1850. This law prevented the successful flight of slaves due to the legality of recovering fugitive slaves from states that did not support slavery and regardless of geographical

location. In addition, there were anti-literacy laws that hampered the integration of black people into society. African Americans were morally educated under religious requirements that justified slavery as a divine plan made by God to made slaves good at obeying the petitions of their masters but rejecting their inclusion in the educational system like other American citizens. The reason why the whites put into effect this discrimination was the risk that literacy posed for the cheap workforce and the institution of slavery. The prohibition of teaching slaves to read and write was necessary to make them unconscious of their rights and their unequal social situation. For this reason those who taught people of colour, be they slaves or freemen, to read and write were punished with a fine of five hundred dollars maximum or imprisoned and the person taught was punished with a fine and a whipping. This law also prohibited the publication of any paper, book or pamphlet that could lead to an “insurrection, conspiracy or resistance among slaves, negroes or free persons of colour” (Williams 58). Due to these continuous bans on black education, Jacobs and Douglass wondered and realized that literacy was the key tool to lead, defend and rise up against white=dominance. Jacobs reflected on what made black people inferior and she admitted that “the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live;” (Jacobs 44). Similarly Douglass realized through his personal reflexions that

a nigger should know nothing but to obey his master (...) if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master (Douglass 29).

Douglass and Jacobs described how the power, supremacy and dominance of whites were acquired driving slaves into uneducated roads. With the slaves’ incapability of expression, rationalization and personal knowledge, slave-owners were able to control and

shape their minds. So masters kept their slaves ignorant in order to settle them into slavery and so block any thoughts in their minds. They had many tricks to destroy their capacity of rationalization and make them believe that slavery was fair and they were under the best conditions blacks could be while they were enslaved. One of the techniques employed by masters described in Douglass' narrative is the creation of an alcohol-dependent slave. Many masters wanted their slaves to be alcoholics in order to mislead them about their capability of being independent people. Therefore, slaves were not able to achieve their objectives on their own; they felt insecure once they gained their freedom. They were accustomed to working for others and they were not taught to think and act for themselves. Maintaining slaves uneducated was essential as the presence of literacy threatened the slavery system. Ignorance was the only way to maintain white dominance and control over the minds and bodies of slaves. However, Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass found their passage to freedom through literacy. Although they were educated differently, Jacobs was taught by her mother's mistress notwithstanding the laws and Douglass was only taught the alphabet and then he had to employ his cunning to learn from the white children, both became literate. However, they admitted that knowledge brought both bad experiences and wisdom: Jacobs' ability to read increased Dr. Flint's possibilities of blackmail but it also helped her to mislead him with false letters from other cities. For Douglass, literacy allowed him to discover the injustice of slavery and its lies, but it gave him the possibility of devising a plan and writing a note impersonating his master. Nevertheless they realized themselves that knowledge meant power. Like almost all slaves, they were not allowed to develop their writing and reading, but they managed to learn and improve their skills and it gave them access to the world hidden beyond bondage. These growing abilities provided Jacobs and Douglass the opportunity to participate in abolitionist activities, their access to freedom and the construction of their identity. Although these actions subverted their

master-slave relationship, these also encouraged them to “fuse their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom” (Williams 7). Jacobs and Douglass’ opposition to their slaveholders’ control, deprivation of liberty and violence raised the necessity of sharing their experiences and making the audience in the north aware of the situation of African Americans. However, it was not until black people decided to turn against white human trafficking and resist their oppression that this barbaric commerce was eradicated. This is why the writings of Douglass and Jacobs had huge repercussions in the African American struggle against this oppressive system. This paper will retrace the literary attempts of African American ex-slaves to deal with the issue of bondage. In the first part I will analyse the strong evidence of a pattern that is reflected in all slave narratives but focussing on Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the life of a slave girl* (1861). In the second part I will examine whether gender difference affected their aim in writing slave narratives. I will try to reflect on how in their construction of self-identity Jacobs questioned the virtues that the patriarchal model claimed were necessary to become a virtuous woman, and stated other principles that formed her new identity as a free and virtuous woman. With regards to Douglass’ narrative, which represents the process of manhood development, I will try to analyse the steps masters took in order to prevent slaves from achieving identity and how Douglass reached his self-definition through literacy.

2. Repeated motifs.

As James Olney states, slave narratives can be classified as history, literature, autobiography or even polemical writings but they will always be a unique production. Although each slave experience narrates a single story, James Olney talks about *sameness* in his work *I was Born*¹. *Sameness* is how Olney refers to the pattern of imitation and repetitiveness in slave narratives despite their being different experiences. It is possible to find differences, but these always seek the same objective: to promote humanitarianism and to make African American slaves able to gain white readers' support for the abolitionist movement. As Wayne Taylor highlights in *The Terrible Time*, all slave narratives follow the same conventions and provide readers with "some of the most compelling themes of nineteenth century slavery, including labour, resistance and fight, family life, relations with masters, and religious belief." Following the slave narratives guide given by Olney I will analyse the most common repeated motifs: self-assertion, beatings, religion, education, food, sexual abuse, etc all those which lead to the dehumanization of the individual.

2.1 Self assertion

Self assertion is the basic step in all slave narratives. Authenticity was quite doubtful so it was important to collect as much personal information as possible. This is the reason why almost all slave narratives provide:

an engraved portrait, signed by the narrator, a title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by himself", and a handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator or by a white editor (David and Gates 152)

¹ Olney, James. "I was born": *Slaves Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature*. The Slave's Narrative. Ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The preface, the illustrations, the introductions by the editors and the letters help to validate the narratives. Their objective is to introduce the narrator of the story, stating that the narration only contains true events and clarifying that the people presented are real and the narratives are written by the slaves or composed by some friend of the slaves. This claim is found in the preface which is habitually employed as a brief introduction of the narrator. It is usually written by a white abolitionist, a white editor or a white friend who gives veracity to and highlights the truth of the slaves' testimony. As can be seen, it was almost always a white person who was brave enough to stand up for black slaves. As Andrews William describes in his essay *How to read a slave narrative*

the antebellum slave narrative carries a black message inside a white envelope.

Prefatory (and sometimes appended) matter by whites attest to the reliability and good character of the black narrator while calling attention to what the narrative would reveal about the moral abominations of slavery.

So the prefaces found in the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs work as introductory material and they help to authenticate their authorship. William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child had an important role here. Garrison stated that the narrative was written by Douglass. He pointed out that although it contained bad experiences it was completely truthful. Similarly Child tried to deny the fictionalisation the story was accused of. Her attempt was also the preparation of the reader towards the tormenting experiences Jacobs narrated.

Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to

run as a slave (...) it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart. (Douglass X)²

The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence. (...) I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity (...) I have not added anything to the incidents or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. (Jacobs 3)³

However the preface was not enough when talking about self assertion. Authors had to defend their authorship and assure that they were alive. The signature affirmed their resistance to slavery and their new identity, as stated in the titles of the narratives: *Incidents in the life of a slave girl written by herself* and *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave written by himself*.⁴ In this way, thanks to their own signature, authors were able to demonstrate they were reliable and trained people whose sole goal was to show the reality of their boundary. Many ex-slave writers tried to demonstrate that their writing was not fiction, they were not fictitious either and they were the sole writers. Thus, Douglass proved it giving personal details, specifying the exact place where his captivity began and signing his full name. Douglass even added the name given by his family and how he changed his name again but still keeping his identity. “The name given me by my mother was, “Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.” I, however, had dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland.” (Douglass 95) To raise his credibility, Douglass exercised a process of personal introduction to obtain the reader’s reliance on his existence. He disposed some details about his childhood. It was quite a common structure narrating their place of birth but it was hardly ever followed by their date of birth. It was commonly unknown.

² Preface written by William Lloyd Garrison

³ Introduction by the editor Lydia Maria Child

⁴ It must be highlighted that Douglass also emphasized his nationality “an American slave” to point out his Americanness. He distinguished himself from African-American slaves. He was portrayed as an American citizen.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot country, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday (Douglass 1)

In contrast, Jacobs omitted as much personal details as possible. She did not even mention her real name. She used the pseudonym Linda Brent. This pseudonym created an issue when she tried to authenticate her narration. The fake name Linda Brent concealed her real identity in order to protect her and avoid retaliation but it created a barrier that complicated the development of veracity. Therefore she had to state that she had related her own autobiography and that it was not fiction.

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 concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course. (Jacobs 1)

She continuously addressed the reader pleading for forgiveness. She used “straightforward language” and “utilizes standard abolitionist rhetoric to lament the inadequacy of her descriptions of slavery” (Jacobs xvi) notwithstanding, her narrative was still considered false, “a work of fiction written by the white abolitionist, Lydia Maria Child” (Johnson 11). Regardless of her pseudonym, her descriptions about sexual oppression and her escape to freedom made her narrative look questionable. It was not until Jean Fagan Yellin found documents which made possible “to trace Harriet Jacobs’s life, to establish her authorship of *Incidents* and to identify the people and places she presented pseudonymously in her book” (Jacobs xvii).

Hand in hand with these features of self-assertion there are other themes in order to create the typical structure of slave narratives that I decided to classify into “the dehumanization category”.

2.2 Dehumanization

Olney talked about some features characteristic in slave narratives:

description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous whippings (...), record of the barriers raised against slavery literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write, description of a Christian slave holder, descriptions of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, account of families being separated and destroyed, descriptions of failed attempt(s) to escape, descriptions of successful attempt(s) to escape, taking the last name. (David and Gates 153)

These sufferings were described by the slaves. Masters carried out these decisions in order to kill any trace of self-identity. The murder of any slave at the hands of white men was not considered a crime. Slave owners could punish slaves in order to strip their human dignity and remove any thought they might have of their own identity or rights. These actions performed as ways of obtaining the dehumanization of individuals are represented in both narratives. The cruelty of the masters towards slaves was the most prominent point in Jacobs' and Douglass' works. They related scenes full of violence in which their masters punish other slaves. This treatment of masters towards slaves was atrocious. Their behaviour created a feeling of impotence among the slaves and the more inhuman slaves were treated, the easier it was to obtain their surrender. During bondage, the only goal of masters was to psych up slaves in order to create commodities and unreasonable and emotionless individuals.

Whippings were the most common way to gain the submission of captives. The rules on the plantations were quite strict so failure to comply or disobedience of these, directly lead to beating. Masters punished those slaves that appeared to behave different from what was expected. The whips intensified their authority and ensured their upper hand. Douglass describes how his master strongly “corrected” his aunt for meeting a black man she loved. Masters used this brutality to show the other slaves the consequences of rebellious behaviour and disobeying their rules. Whippings were very effective because “laying stripes across the bare back or buttocks caused indescribable pain, especially when each stroke dug deeper into previously opened wounds.” (Savitt 112)

He used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. (...) The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; (Douglass 5)

It must be mentioned that many times masters just sought for pretence to hand down a heavy punishment, to beat or to rape their black slaves in order to make them aware of their position. The threats of masters made slaves become submissive, removed any thought of identity and erased a sense of self- power. This resulted in complete white dominance.

Food was another tool employed to gain the servility of slaves. Their food was rationed depending on sex, age and work. Slave owners exploited their slaves with excessive hard work that lead them to exhaustion. The sometimes daily rations were not enough, their work qualities were poor and their clothes did not protect them from weather conditions so they could not render useful to their masters and they abused and blackmailed them. It was like a chain, there was not enough food, so there was no strength and diseases appeared. So, masters always gained economic benefits because slaves were the ones who

did not work properly, therefore they had to settle for what they were given depending on the work they did. Douglass offered elaborate information about the food and clothes slaves were given.

The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; (...) The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; (...) When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day (Douglass 8).

Staying in good health was made impossible by the inadequate clothing. As Douglass mentioned, slaves were given the same clothes regardless of the season, although the rain, wind, sun, the temperatures and insects were not the same in winter and summer. Unfortunately, the wills of their masters in the matter of food showed practically the same disregard but food could be found in plantations, they could risk and obtain food from the “storehouse, chicken coop or hog pen” (Savitt 84) but clothes had to be provided by their owners because they were not acquired from plantations, they had to be purchased or earned after performing some good work to a generous white person. These poor conditions lead to diseases because they were exposed to burns, scratches and frostbite that meant the death of many slaves. However, masters managed to make slaves think they were comfortable, because they were given food and a bed, and they could be beaten more than they were. Slave owners always told lies about the situation in which their slave neighbours lived so their conditions were not considered so bad and they would be pleased. Whites made sure that slaves did not doubt their lower situation and so they did not rise up against masters. This was easily achieved by controlling them, maintaining them uneducated and

through an advantageous religion for whites. These are other features mentioned in Olney's pattern: the barriers against slave literacy and the Christian slaveholders.

Douglass and Jacobs present white and black Christians or converted Christian characters. Their Christianity differed in the way they practised their faith. Religion ensured the self-destruction of slaves. The Bible was manipulated in order to justify the violence towards slaves and the punishments to control them. Masters shaped passages of the Bible on a whim and so slaves thought that the horrible circumstances of slavery were their destiny. Douglass provides a great example when he mentions the passage of the Genesis (9, 20-25) used by many whites to justify the reason why black people had to be slaves. This passage is the one with Ham and Noah. It was said that Ham saw Noah drunk and naked so he cursed Canaan, the son of Ham, and his descendants to be slaves. The skin of his children turned darker and as there were more descendants the darker the skin became. Whites applied this theory to justify the destiny of black slaves. They called Ham the forefather of all the black Africans and said it was marked by God. Paradoxically, the violence African Americans had to suffer was directly associated to Christianity. Jacobs highlighted that "I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him [Dr. Flint] were after he was a communicant" (Jacobs 74) and Douglass also asserted that "For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst (...) the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others" (Douglass 67). It can be noticed that both agreed slaveholders who professed religion were worse than those who were not religious. Christianity worked as bridge to psychologically control black brains. Those Christian slaveholders mentally reconstructed African Americans victims embezzling the Word of God, the blood sacrifice and brutalizing the original sin. Masters continuously reminded slaves of their vocation, to ensure the fulfilment of the Word of God and that "if you disobey your earthly master, you

offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments" (Jacobs 69). Here Jacobs reflects that masters effectively were seen as Gods on Earth. The use of thug force eventually turned them into tyrants dressed up like a Christian God. The on-going psychological and physical torments were essential to achieve their omnipotent power and distort slaves' minds about who was the real God, the world Creator or the white oppressor. As Douglass argued,

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul and spirit (...) He had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. (...) I do verily believe that (...) he was a sincere worshipper of the highest God (Douglass 53, 54, 55).

The absolute power and dominance that was imposed in dark-skinned people was accomplished by the mixture of an embezzled religion and violence. New beliefs were created and the self identity slaves had acquired destructed. Following the explanation of the theologians Joanne Carlson and Rebecca Parker, Christianity has been a primary force in shaping our acceptance of abuse. Slaveholders tried to generate in the mind of slaves the idea of religion as suffering, redemption and salvation. The sacrifices of slaves were supposed to be weighted in heaven and the abuses they suffered saved them from perversion, so they assumed: "it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment" (Jacobs 17). This easy distortion would not have been possible if literacy had not been a barrier against slaves. So there is a connection between religion and literacy. Enslavers wanted them to be Christian, to understand the Bible they proclaimed, but they did not want them to be able to read and write but the idea of making slaves Christians, arouse their curiosity of learning to fulfil and preach the Word of God.

African Americans were seen as simple objects forced to live illiterate lives. Illiteracy supported the enslavement of African Americans because the possibility of

getting help when they tried to escape was harder, as literacy provided the “means to write a pass to freedom, to learn of abolitionist activities or to read the Bible” (Williams 7). It was a form of power which could provide them with the ability to convince other slaves to revolt. Therefore, under the threat of a possible slave revolt, the constitution of the Slave Code in 1833 was proclaimed, just after the Nat Turner revolution. Thus, any person who “shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than two hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars”⁵.

The narratives of Douglass and Jacobs talk about how their slave authors developed reading and writing skills and its connection to freedom. They mention how some slaves learnt from other slaves regardless of the law, and how the authors themselves were taught the alphabet with the help of their mistresses although Herpes Weekly had warned “the alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved refuse to teach them to read.” Literacy was harmful for their conscience and body. Its acquisition was discouraged and brought with it some disadvantages. Although Douglass understood that literacy was “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass 20), he developed the capacity to reason so he discovered the boundary of injustice and it made him lose his hope for freedom and equality. “It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast” (Douglass 35).

Similarly, literacy encouraged the sexual advances of Dr. Flint towards Jacobs. He turned her ability into vulnerability.

⁵John G. Akin, A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama - 1833, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/slavery/lesson1/doc1-9.html>

One day he caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. (Jacobs 31)

However, both realized that literacy also stimulated them and it developed important skills that empowered them. Jacobs tricked Dr Flint into thinking she was not in the South. She sent a letter from the North and it helped her in her escape. Similarly, Douglass could also write “protections” for him and other slaves in order to escape, although the attempt failed, it increased his desire for freedom and his leadership among slaves. Literacy was greatly feared because it “becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to re-appropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (Mirra 128) and it increased their desire for freedom and building their identity.

3. Gender

As I previously mentioned, reading slave narratives one can notice that they are all made up of memories of childhood, scenes of horror, whippings, the quest for their own identity and the desire for freedom. Nonetheless, there are some differences regarding gender. There is a contrast between autobiographical narratives written by escaped females or ex-slave female writers, and those narratives written by ex-slave male writers. Men usually focus on their professional experiences and try to emphasize their manhood highlighting scenes where the protagonists are courage and strength. For instance, Frederick does it when he describes the fighting episodes with Mr. Covey or when he finally manages a successful but dangerous escape. Thus, the reader can notice the accent on preserving manhood in order to gain freedom. Unlike men, women focus on their domestic and personal life and they pay more attention to the details that have to do with their family and friends. Women, such as Harriet Jacobs, strive to justify their “not good” choices and create a connection with white readers in the north while describing the black women’s situation of oppression. So, focusing on both narratives there are some differences with respect to gender. The most remarkable contrast is how the abuse is practiced according to gender.

3.1 Gendered treatment

As Laura Ware says in her article *Traditional Gender Roles and Slavery*, gendered treatment refers to the “differential treatment of people based on their genders”. Although men were seen as the strong and superior gender and women as the delicate and weak slaves, they were exploited similarly. Females and males shared beatings, labours and living conditions but it must be observed that women endured more sufferings.

Male slaves were physically, psychologically and even sexually exploited. When referring to sexually, it is obvious that male slaves did not work or weren’t sold as breeders, but they were used as a reproductive method in order to obtain strong future slaves. As

slaves had no voice, masters could order them to do whatever they wanted to and they could destroy, manipulate or even build slave families at their whim. However, male slaves were characterized for being psychologically and physically exploited rather than sexually. As the strong gender, they were expected to carry out hard labour under extreme conditions following the orders and wishes of their masters. Masters employed their dominance to snatch the virility of their slaves. The whippings, beatings and the exhaustion after hard work were employed as a way of humiliation. Especially, masters punished the family of the slave as a method of taking away the role of protector. So male slaves were stripped of following the typical patriarchal model in which the man had the duty of supporting and protecting his family. The impotence of not being able to protect their family implied psychological abuse. They were removed from their manhood because they could not provide any economic support either. They were slaves too and it was almost impossible to maintain a family on their own, therefore they could not take care of their children or block their families' separation. Most of their male children were separated from their family and sold to other masters' houses and there was nothing they could do. Black men could not avoid their wives', daughters', aunts' or sisters' rapes by their master either which usually led to unwanted pregnancies and "the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father" (Douglass 3). Male slaves could not stop these abuses, because female slaves were the property of slave owners, so their sexuality belonged to the white male too and the attempt to control them would only lead to a double punishment; whippings for him and whippings and rape for her. Thus the possibility of protecting the family was inhibited and as a consequence their masculinity and their male pride were dismissed.

He [Captain Anthony] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back [Aunt Hester] till she was literally covered with blood. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this

horrible exhibition.(...) It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant (Douglass 5).

So, although the white masters' supremacy affected black virility because men were not able to provide the basic needs of the family (protection, food, shelter, health, education, clothes, etc) women were affected. Women suffered a double exploitation. Women suffered the misfortune of being black and of being women. Women encountered many more problems during their bondage than men. As Jacobs claimed "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications, peculiarly their own" (Jacobs 77). As I previously mentioned, men worked in fields, carrying out duties where strength was essential but as "slave women, just as their male counterparts, performed taxing field labor from dawn to dusk, that motherhood did not exempt them from work" (White 16). Douglass also points out the equality in the workplace:

Very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; (...) and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn. At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field. There must be no halting; everyone must be at his or her post (...) no age nor sex finds any favor. (Douglass 17)

Even though women worked in equal conditions as men, they did not undergo bondage the same way as male slaves did. Slave-owners reserved "certain tasks for women exclusively" and "just as naturally, put his bondswomen to work chopping cotton as washing, ironing or cooking" (Jones 12). So, similarly to men, women were exploited for forced labour, but a high number of women worked inside the house of their slave-owners, avoiding hard labour and carrying out tasks such as cooking or nursing. Nonetheless, although lighter, these were not easier; working inside the home created a situation which compromised their virtues of purity, submissiveness, piety and domesticity. The closer

black women were to their slave-owners, the more exposed they were to their masters' sexual abuses. Sexual attacks on female slaves working inside the house were quite common because "from the very beginning of a woman's enslavement, she had to cope with sexual abuse, abuse made legitimate by the conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels." (White 89). Being black and also a woman left slaves unprotected from their master's desire. They had to be voiceless; no one was going to shelter them because "American white women were expected to be passive because they were females. But black women had to be submissive because they were black and slaves" (White 17) and "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" (Jacobs 27). It must be highlighted that the continuous rapes that slave women suffered were part of a strategy. Slave-owners used enslaved women to increase their wealth and their wombs were exploited as a part of the productive and advantageous pregnancy system to their masters. Women were seen as reproductive machines. There was no control over reproduction. Females were quite profitable because apart from doing agricultural labour and home chores they bred children.

As blacks, slave women were exploited for their skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops; as women, they performed a reproductive function vital to individual slaveholders' financial interest and to the inherently expansive system of slavery in general (Jones 12)

The fertility of black women kept and spread the slavery population. Hence, any offspring born from rape or a consensual relationship increased the slave-owners' capitalism because, according to the Act XII, *Laws of Virginia*, December 1662, "all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother". Douglass exemplifies how a slave woman became her enslaver's livelihood.

He was only able to buy one slave; (...) he bought her, as he said, for a breeder. (...) Eventually she gave birth to twins and such was the joy of Covey and his wife, that nothing they could do for Caroline during her confinement was too good, or too hard to be done. The children were regarded as being quite an addition to his wealth. (Douglass 59)

Thus, this social act left some women even more unprotected and other women more despised. Becoming a profitable commodity had some benefits in the short term as non-fertile women were treated like “barren sows and be passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the next” (White 1001) and masters accused them of “miscarrying intentionally, master also blamed mothers for the high child mortality rate among enslaved children” (Green 215). Nonetheless, those who could improve their masters’ economy enjoyed privileges. This change in a master’s behaviour towards pregnant slaves resulted in many women slaves selling their purity to obtain benefits or as Deborah White reports “some female slaves even got pregnant in order to avoid backbreaking field labour” (White 87) in addition to being gratified later on by their masters because once the baby was born, the mother was given more food, extra clothes and additionally “a calico dress and a bright silver dollar” (White 100). The birth of a baby girl was very valuable to the master but it was not pleasant for the mother because girls could become some white man’s sexual property so it was almost impossible that “adolescence and young womanhood were not unscratched by sexual abuse” (White 96). So, it can be said that women suffered before becoming mothers because they were raped, during their pregnancy because they had to carry out almost the same labour and after becoming mother because as a woman they knew what their daughter was going to go through, as Jacobs describes “if God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave” (Jacobs 28). Owing to this, many slave women preferred their newborn baby girls to die than develop into their master’s sexual property or the object

upon which her master carried out his fury. Thus, many women opted for birth control in fear of their children's future and the control over their own bodies also meant a way of rebelling against their master's dominance.

Regarding this theme, it must be highlighted that white women were also victims of male oppression. It was not as hard as for black women, but whites were also at white men's commands. Jacobs talks about the difference between a white woman getting pregnant from a black man and a black woman getting pregnant from a white man. When black women were pregnant, both by a white man or a black man, it was pure joy to their master because it meant an increase in wealth, but when it was the other way around, the black father had to flee or he would be murdered.

His daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers, and sent him out of the state (...) In such cases the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history. But if the white parent is the father, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market (Jacobs 52).

So, although the treatment regarding the labour of slaves and their physical punishments were similar, the sexual and psychological abuse and the way in which masters broke their manhood and their womanhood was not the same. This is the reason why the aim of their narratives had different purposes regarding gender.

3.2 The aim of the narratives regarding gender

The road that slave writers followed in order to build their identity became the main theme of their narratives. Each slave writer highlighted a topic depending on gender. As a woman, Harriet Jacobs depicted her quest to become a virtuous woman, while at the same time reflecting on the attributes of True Womanhood. Her objective was to make women understand that the values asked of them by the Cult of True Womanhood were dubious

and did not form a virtuous woman. Becoming a virtuous woman was possible through the achievement of other principles she had developed in her experience as a slave. However, Douglass represents a transition from a beast to a human being. His writing focuses on his heroism and manhood while describing a child who became a brave man. He has to start from scratch in order to define himself. His narrative represents the connection that exists in the achievement of freedom with the discovery of the self as a human, but these two aspects are put to the test with Douglass' first contact with literacy.

3.2.1 Becoming a virtuous woman regardless of the Cult of True Womanhood.

Jacobs shows the impossibility of accomplishing the attributes of True womanhood by which society judged a woman. According to Barbara Welter, an American History scholar from the City University of New York, there were four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity- that work together to form the perfect mother, wife, sister and daughter (Welter 152). These righteous qualities were found in magazines, novels and newspaper articles. However, *Incidents* proves that neither African American slaves nor white free female women were able to fulfil the values required to be a true woman because the situation women faced through slavery made this cult unattainable. However, Jacobs builds her identity regardless of the virtues of the cult. She realized that this cult was contradictory because if she subjugated to any of these conditions, she would break another. Her experience as a slave made her comprehend what a virtuous woman meant and which values truly defined her: courage, honesty, independence, patience, self-control, cunning and kindness.

Early nineteenth century society was completely obsessed with the perfect attitude of women. Men were charged "with the task of creating and expanding an industrialized civilization from wilderness, a True Woman was expected to serve as the protectress of

religion and civilized society” (Cruea 188). Being a True Woman was a responsibility many women had to face from youth. There was an essential attribute of woman’s virtue that was to be found in any “good” woman; it was piety. As Welter said, religion was a “gift of God and nature” and it was the appropriate quality of any women. Men were charmed by women who fitted this value because women were responsible for keeping men in touch with God. It was believed that the mind and heart of men were weaker so they could not control their passions. It was here where the role of pious women was of importance. They had to control men’s actions in order to calm their passions and remain faithful to God although men were “by nature more sexual than they, would try to assault it” (Welter 155). So, it was a woman’s duty to maintain her purity and at the same time save a man from the tyranny of his soul’s impulses. Those lacks of piety in men, made women look lovelier and more desirable. It was considered that women, who had this elemental quality, would also possess the others: purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Piety is then followed by purity. It was also an indispensable virtue for women. The loss of a woman’s treasure, their virginity, was considered unfeminine and a woman could become not a woman at all “but a member of some lower order” (Welter 154). This is the reason why many women preferred death rather than having sex or being raped. This absence of purity depicted an unworthy woman, a “fallen angel”. A woman had the duty of maintaining her virtue, even if she was assaulted by a man. A woman’s resistance towards a man’s harassment and her rejection of letting a man “take liberties incompatible with her delicacy” (Welter 155) symbolized her purity, divine power and strength. Purity was considered a necessary ideal to achieve marriage and, in turn, the ultimately feminine happiness. However, Jacobs removes the notion of chastity as the most valued virtue and presents the principles of courage and determination as her most remarkable virtues. From an early age she was harassed by her master but Harriet repeatedly fought against her

master's perversions, challenging him and overcoming temptation. Just as Welter notes, a woman who "managed to withstand man's assaults on her virtue, she demonstrates her superiority and her power over him" (Welter 156). Jacobs showed she was not a passive respondent when she employed her voice to revolt against her master "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (Jacobs 38) but despite Dr. Flint's blackmails, Harriet finally broke her moral principles having consensual sex with Mr. Sands. Her sexual encounter with a white man was a way of putting forth her authority because as she mentions "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you". For the first time she exercised control over her body and life and she acknowledges she planned it with "deliberate calculation" (Jacobs 54). Jacobs took this decision in order to avoid Dr. Flint taking away her virginity and thus gain freedom for her and her future children. She chose a white man who could buy her and who could give her better living conditions. The sacrifice of losing purity built a road for her transformation into a virtuous woman with strong convictions, although it also meant a lack of piety and therefore, the lack of purity. Despite her choices, Harriet Jacobs had been taught to price her virginity as many other young women because promiscuity turned them away from God. Women were taught to be chaste until their wedding night. Thenceforth, women became an empty and dependent individual. They had no existence or emotions of their own and were under the command of their husbands and household, only skilled for rearing children and being obedient. The obedient woman had to be submissive, which was another virtue alongside the afore mentioned attributes. Men were the doers and women had to be the passive responders. Man was the one who controlled the economy of the family, the worker and the protector and obviously man was a "woman's superior by God's appointment" (Welter 159). They did not allow women to do things that would make them aware of the lack of

equality between men and women. Men wanted to be the only ones able to carry out difficult tasks or tasks that required a high level of because women had “a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love” (Welter 160). Once again Jacobs reveals how wrong the Cult of True Womanhood was. Her cunning proves that women and men have the same intellectual development. The ability of cunning brings Jacobs the possibility of running away. Dr. Flint, sending her obscene notes, had turned her ability of reading into vulnerability. Notwithstanding, Jacobs turned her “vulnerability” into a weapon. She acquired power over him when she wrote false letters and “resolved to match my cunning against his cunning” (Jacobs 128). Jacobs obtained the information she needed from the newspaper and she explains that “for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to render them a service” (Jacobs 128). She took advantage of the weapon whites used to control blacks and she showed that literacy and cunning did not mean separation from God but the union between faith and literacy. Unlike Jacobs, the cult of womanhood portraits women who rejected the use of intellect, “women were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuit take them away from God” (Welter 154). This tool was used to make women dependent on men and in addition, to be passive and obedient to any of their petitions. They could not think or act for themselves because they would tamper “with the order of the Universe” and “a really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can but she is conscious of inferiority and therefore grateful for support” (Welter 159). So women had to feel inferior, weak and fearful and they were dependent on the protection of men. Women were driven into the realm of masculine dominance and tricked into believing that they were incapable of performing some tasks that men, “physically superior”, could. Nevertheless, for Jacobs, being dependent woman had no place in her transformation into a virtuous woman. Even though Dr. Flint offered her a house of her own and to “make a lady of [her]” (Jacobs: 35), she chose living as a runaway

slave in her grandmother's attic over succumbing to Dr. Flint's obscenity. Dr. Flint's affirmation to make a woman of her, refers both, to the loss of her virginity and to the duties men expected from women at home. As virtuous women, they had to do their best in their own sphere; their home. The routines that home labour involved were almost inexperience and unknown to men, whom were not educated in here. This sphere assigned to women is linked to the domesticity virtue. This virtue was highly supported by religion because it did not position women out of their "proper sphere", their home. It claimed that woman could not do any task that detracted them from "the charm of feminine delicacy" (Welter 153). This turned women into domestic, vulnerable and therefore, submissive individuals. A true feminine genius had to be feeble, naive, indecisive and clingingly dependent, as if she were still a child, but at the same time be able to take care of her domestic affairs and bring happiness and joy to their home and woman had "no arm other than gentles" if not she "deserves to lose her empire" (Pinckney 119). This meant that women had to attend solely to their duties and not give their opinion unless the man of the house asked for it because it was important that the home be a peaceful place. However, Jacobs was not able to remain voiceless. She was gifted with the virtue of sincerity and although sincerity first brought her pain "He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. (...) You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (Jacobs 62) later it guided her in the slave struggle for freedom. The narration of her experiences as a slave was quite useful in the mission of telling the women of the north about the situation of slaves. She claimed she was being honest while describing her sufferings, and in order to demonstrate her honesty and earn the trust of the audience, she narrated the episode of her life of which she was not proud, the loss of her virginity. So, although a good woman should not give her opinion and manifest against a man, Jacobs exposes crime and oppression in her narrative.

But I now entered on my fifteenth year — a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. (...) He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. (Jacobs 27)

Thus, the cult of womanhood developed in women the burden of suffering in silence and obeying all orders otherwise the harmony of the house was broken. Having a cheerful place helped the family come together and ousted women's husbands and sons from the excess of human passions, thus some magazines showed women as a "comforter" and wives were seen in those magazines as a "source of Comfort and the Spring of the Joy" (Welter 163). As Barbara Welter mentions, one of the most important functions of a comforter was her role as a nurse. The health of the family resided in the hands of the mother-wife. Their capacity of curing their family was highly valued by society. Women felt more useful as they could do other activities rather than housework. The huge number of illnesses helped their nursing experience, and nursing any sick male gave them the possibility of demonstrating their importance in the family. Nursing a man in particular was the biggest example of power because it produced a man dependent on a woman and the opportunity to help the aggressive, rational and, above all, independent man, made women happy. Men just wanted to keep women busy inside the house and in order to make this happened, men created the "science of housekeeping". This established that women learnt at the same time as they took over their duties, as chemistry that "could be utilized in cooking, geometry in dividing cloth and phrenology in discovering talent in children" (Welter 165) and it also stated that "the values of their sons, who were likely to have a direct impact on the nation's success" (Woloch 90) were the duty of the mother. The education of children was the responsibility of the mother and depending on the mother's behaviour,

children would or would not correctly follow proper morality as mothers shaped. So, learning and housekeeping were contemplated as complementary. Thus, carrying out all these tasks, any women could create a place of rest, comfort and happiness resulting in the domesticity virtue but Jacobs did not take care of her family in her respective domestic sphere, performing the chores of a righteous mother. She did not act selfishly and she exchanged the commodity of a house for the darkness of her grandmother's attic. At this point Jacobs earned the last three virtues that turned her into a true woman: self-control, patience and altruism. As it is said in the cult of true womanhood, a virtuous woman had the role of nurse and had to take care of her family. In a way, Jacobs acted as an invisible nurse because although she could not be there when she saw her child covered with blood, she was procuring her children's future protection far from slavery. She proves her altruism when she admitted that she "had paid for the redemption of my children" (Jacobs 123), and her sufferings were a part of the price she had to pay in order to obtain divine salvation for her family. So she spent seven years in her grandmother's garret until her grandmother obtained the ownership of her children. While she is in the attic she demonstrates her mental and physical strength and therefore, her self-control and patience. She endures the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter, in addition to wounds caused by insects. "But for weeks I was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning" (Jacobs 115). She was aware that the achievement of her freedom was a slow process of patience and the only way of succeeding was self-control. Although she could not act as a righteous mother and create a peaceful place for her family, she "had [her] consolations. Through [her] peeping-hole [she] could watch the children" (Jacobs 115). Thus, Jacobs realized that there was another way of attaining patience rather than making beds as Mrs. Farrar stated "making bed was good exercise, the repetitiveness of routine tasks inculcated patience and

perseverance” (Welter 165). It was supposed to be a good way of achieving energy, gaining patience and being more perseverant.

The principles required were not completely fulfilled by any woman in Jacobs narrative. Aunt Marthy always remained pure because her extreme devotion never lead her away from purity and she was also appreciated due to her domesticity, however, she was not submissive. She was known because she threatened a white man with a gun and evicted him from her home. “I had been told that she once chased a white gentleman with a loaded pistol, because he insulted one of her daughters” (Jacobs 29). It was a demonstration of disrespectfulness towards men, nonetheless she became greatly respected. Similarly, Mrs. Bruce lacked submission. She did not act passively to men, she helped Jacobs and she got involved into a conflict challenging Dr. Flint. So she breached the submissive value. The only one who remained submissive was Mrs. Flint, but she was not domestic. She did not clean or cook, she “was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to super intend her household affairs” (Jacobs 12) and she did not keep harmony in the house. Since she found out about the lascivious behaviour of her husband towards Jacobs, her house had become a violent place. Her jealousy blocked her from feeling piety and her anger turned her into another oppressor, although she looked like the ideal women to the the rest of the community. So, although Jacobs was the one who acted directly against, and broke with the the standards asked of women by the Cult of True Womanhood, she encouraged other women to build themselves up based on the virtues that she herself developed through her awful experience as a slave. The virtues she embodied could be followed by every black or white woman in order to become a virtuous woman. So, it can be said that Incidents proves that the Cult of True Womanhood was an unattainable manifest in which white as well black women were oppressed.

3.2.2 How a slave became a self-made man

The suppression of manhood was the essential tool in order to control any possible revolt against the slaveholding society. The objective was the total disappearance of a slave's identity. Douglass' narrative depicts the steps masters took to remove his agency from birth to adulthood and describes his experience as an illiterate slave who was treated as a beast but became a man through the acquisition of literacy.

According to Douglass, identity and freedom would never take place without literacy. He considered that to recover manhood, the possession of self-identity and the possession of voice were the defining aspects towards becoming an individual. Douglass shows how the deprivation of these characteristics started from birth because it proved the existence of the individual. Therefore, knowing the exact date and place a person is born allows humans to create their own identity. However, these birth details were taken away from him although he knew that he "was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, (...) Maryland" he has "no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" because "the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs" (Douglass: 1). This unawareness was the first step to separate African Americans from their legitimate existence, because bondage entailed the alienation of slaves from any fact of existence that could link them to rational human beings. Thus, the reasoning behind this was the intention of removing identity because, as James Olney said, the assertion of identity is freedom. In order to avoid the creation of an identity, families were separated. The destruction of familial ties resulted in the disruption of the innate connection between mother and child, therefore as a consequence, there was not any emotional attachment between them. Douglass mentions "My mother and I were separated when I was an infant (...) to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child"

(Douglass: 2). This separation built insensitive slaves and avoided the possible revolt of the child or the mother in case of family abuse. The intention was the lack of feelings between relatives and Douglass describes its full working when his mother died. Her death caused him the same emotions as he could have “felt at the death of a stranger” (Douglass: 3). It represents the completely broken child-mother connection and the slaves non development of affection towards their families. In the same way, the union with the father was usually hard because many slave-owners just wanted women to breed children and increase their wealth, so many children were the result of rapes from masters or any other unknown slave. Some families were not separated unless their master died, but once this happened, the feelings of the slaves were not taken into account as they were not humans but beasts. As James Olney stresses, it was quite common to see scenes where “distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South” (Olney: 51). Douglass also depicts the distribution of the slaves when his master died and how as commodities they were “equally divided between Mrs. Lucretia and Master Andrew” (Douglass: 39). So, from very early on, child slaves were denied the opportunity to develop personal awareness and build a family with its respective affections. The next step in order to deprive male slaves from identity was the removal of manhood. The denigration of their virility in order to obtain compliant slaves was achieved through the use of thug force and humiliation. So as to ignore their human qualities, they were given the same living conditions as animals. Slaves could not perceive themselves as equal citizens to whites and wonder about their rights because they felt inferior, but African Americans and animals were treated and positioned at the same level on the social ladder and their sense of worth was annihilated: “men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being (Douglass: 39). Their life

conditions as humans were annulled because, like animals, they needed the permission and sustenance of their masters and the control of slaves was based on the seizure of basic needs: “no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees”. As an example, Douglass compared the behaviour of children to pigs “like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush (...) some with naked hands, and none with spoons (Douglass: 23,24). The incapability of providing the basic necessities of the family affected male virility. Men were unable to execute their role as protector as they could not save their families from illness, rapes or being sold. The attempt to make slaves feel biologically inferior and dependent on masters for meagre rations of food and clothes succeeded. Then, to complete the destruction of their rational identities, they just had to ban their right to education and opinion. Masters resorted to punishments and illiteracy to make this oppression possible. Thus, the fact of expressing an idea or questioning their masters’ will was not contemplated amongst slaves. No matter what their opinion was, if they were guilty or innocent, they were deprived of their human rights and their voice as subjects. Douglass describes how as objects, silence was the only option, “no explanation was allowed a slave, showing himself to have been wrongfully accused” (Douglass: 18) and it was pointless contradicting the decisions of the masters because “no matter how innocent a slave might be - it availed him nothing (...) to be convicted was to be punished” (Douglass: 18). So, the threat of torture maintained order in the slaveholding society. Violence was the tool to remove any trace of manhood or any attempt of expressing wills. Douglass describes the “nigger breaker”, as Mr. Covey was called, as the man who had the ability to re-educate stubborn slaves and gain their submission. He was the one who “transformed [Douglass] into a brute” (Douglass: 56). Douglass mentions that the fact of shaping a man into a brute formed part of the masters’ quest for taking away his manhood and consequently his dehumanization. As Douglass describes Mr. Covey took his happiness, feelings and his

hopes for freedom. Douglass was broken in body, soul and spirit through beatings and exhaustive work. As William Garrison claims in the preface, slaves were part of a brute creation because slaves found punishment but also provisions in their masters. This was planned in order to render slaves incompetent and unable to rise up or testify against the white man who provided poor but essential necessities. At that point, any slave valued his master and focused only on his task and his survival like any animal. Therefore, the detachment of manhood was the result of an unstoppable and insane spiral of violence from which literacy and courage were the only ways out. Finally, the inaccessibility to literacy subjugated slaves to slaveholders. According to white belief, literacy distinguished brutes from humans because “education and slavery were incompatible with each other” (Douglass: 33). However, unlike the typical attitude expected from masters, Mrs. Auld showed Douglass the advantage of literacy. The admonition of Mr. Auld increased Douglass’ interest, and he understood “what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man (...) From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.” (Douglass: 29) Mrs. Auld gave Douglass the tool to start his literacy process and run away from mental degradation because in teaching him the alphabet, his mistress “had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*” (Douglass: 33). From that point, Douglass embarked upon the road to recover his manhood and construct his identity.

Douglass never turned back in his attempt and he planned how he could learn from the white children of Baltimore. The ability to read made him able to express emotions and thoughts and become aware of his condition as a slave and the possibility of freedom. He states how reading “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance” (Douglass: 35). He acquired reason to create his own thoughts and became the leader of other slaves.

Nonetheless, literacy also brought him discontentment because learning to read was “a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without remedy” (Douglass: 35). Despite the bad experiences, he realized that literacy provided power, and power resulted in the possession of identity, so he shared his knowledge with the other slaves in his community. He recalls that “it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race” (Douglass: 71). His actions helped other slaves become interested in the development of their identity and aware of the boundary. As he describes, he was proud because “several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency” (Douglass: 71). Education gave him the weapon to gain reason in order to develop his identity and become a proper man. However, his unmanageable attitude after discovering the power of literacy carried him to Mr. Covey who almost languished his intellect, but as Douglass remembers “from whence came the spirit I don’t know. I resolved to fight” (Douglass: 62). His triumph in the fight with Covey, after he thought he was absolutely broken, was another step which positioned him closer to freedom and manhood. This battle changed him as a slave as he became aware of his condition as an equal human. This moved him away from his incorrect notion of being an object and inferior because “It rekindled in me the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (Douglass: 63). However, his manhood was not completely achieved until he was capable of earning money for himself and able to support his family. Once he found a job and he could save the money he earned with his daily efforts he recalls that “there was no work too hard, none too dirty” (Douglass: 99) as he “was at work for myself and newly-married wife” (Douglass: 99). Thus, the opportunity of having a salary allowed him to subscribe to “The Liberator”. This enabled him to come into contact with the abolitionist movement. Literacy, once again, saved him from slavery because his reading abilities

allowed him to participate in the fight for social rights. It helped him to discover the struggle for black equality when he first read about the emancipation of slaves in *The Columbian Orator*, and later about the abolitionist movement in the *Baltimore American*. His writing abilities allowed him to have a voice because his chance to write his narrative was considered as “the ultimate act of self-affirmation, the ultimate denial of enslavement” (Yuval: xviii)

Douglass decided to change his name, which is an important element in the development of Douglass’ self-definition. He eventually became known by the name which identifies him nowadays, but his first change of name was on September 3rd 1838, after leaving his chains and running away to be a sailor. Douglass met Anna Murray, a free black woman who became his wife. Their marriage, in addition to symbolizing his power as a free man who could take his own decisions, also exemplified a change in his identity. Douglass attached a copy of his marriage certificate in which his aim to build his own identity can be seen.

THIS may certify, that I joined together in holy matrimony Frederick Johnson and Anna Murray, as man and wife, in the presence of Mr. David Ruggles and Mrs. Michaels.

“JAMESW. C. PENNINGTON.

“*New York, Sept. 15, 1838.*”

He was named “Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey” by his mother and in Baltimore he was known as “Stanley”, so once he could take decisions about himself, he changed his name as a way of representing a new identity. Notwithstanding, it was not until he finally settled in Bedford when he decided to renew his name. Thus, he finally succeeded in his attempt to create the identity he considered pertinent to him. It can be said that he wanted to be remembered and distinguished as he says “there were so many

Johnsons in New Bedford, it was already quite difficult to distinguish between them” (Douglass: 96). He modified his last name to Douglass which came from the novel Mr. Johnson was reading “Lady of the Lake”. However, he did not change his name, Frederick, as a way of preserving his real identity, the one which marked his birth. As a result, he gained the right to have a personal name which identified him and “from that time until now I have been called Frederick Douglass” (Douglass: 96). His final new name closed his process of self-definition and embodied a new free and independent man.

4. Conclusion

In the narratives of Harriet A. Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, the authors relate the experience that turned them into rational and free individuals. Both writers look for the same objective: to make the audience aware of their situation as slaves, to encourage other slaves to rise up and join the abolitionist movement and to demonstrate to the audience they had the same rights as whites to live as free people in an equal society.

Despite the symbolic differences that exist in the aims of the authors, there is no gender difference when denouncing the injustices of slavery. Douglass and Jacobs follow the same pattern in their narratives. Both describe a process of self-assertion and dehumanization. As ex-slave writers, while recalling their experiences, they testify their assertion as real individuals because the tragic scenes of whippings and rape they shared leads the audience to compare their narratives to fiction. The appeals to the reader and the attached documents such as certificates of marriage, photos, letters or advertisements for the capture of slaves were mechanisms to make their experiences believable. This incredulousness/scepticism/disbelief from the audience was due to the process of dehumanization described in the narrative. Women were turned into reproductive machines and men deprived of their manhood. Their qualities as individuals became their vulnerability but the profit of their masters. As previously mentioned, the gendered treatment between slaves had no place. There was an obvious difference in the treatment between African Americans and whites, but black women and black men were equally treated. There was not a “weaker sex” when it came to work. In addition, the requirement of woman to be dependent on men did not exist either. Males did not have the possibility of supporting and protecting their families, and female slaves had to use their abilities in order to achieve their goals. Female and male slaves were at the same poor level, without any advantages depending on gender. However, a white woman was taught that “she is in

measure dependent” and “timid, doubtful and clingingly dependent; a perpetual child” (Welter 159, 160) and that was a difference, not in gender, but in race. However, the lack of dependence made male and female slaves autonomous and self-taught. Their independence led them to literacy and both abilities together built their road to freedom. Literacy was their weapon for freedom, as it gave them the power to act, think and develop for themselves. Although it is more emphasized by Douglass, because the purpose of his narrative is more focused on the achievement of manhood through literacy, Jacobs lets the reader know that a high priority in her plan was to escape. Jacobs used literacy as a tool to escape from bondage, but Douglass used literacy as his most powerful weapon in his struggle for social rights. Literacy supplements his manhood, but it does not have the same value for Jacobs. Family is what supplements Jacobs. Family ties are presented and have the same strength in her narrative as literacy in Douglass’. Jacobs conveys great attachment to her family from the narration of her childhood to the end of her experiences, but Douglass does not. The reason for Douglass’ detachment from family ties, is due to the destruction of the innate connection between mother and child that he suffered. This is why men look for their freedom regardless of family while women struggle for the freedom of their family.

Therefore, their journeys depict the process from their loss of humanity to the construction of a self-identity. In a society which expected certain values and actions depending on social position and gender, it is common that male and female narratives present some variations relevant to their gender. Female writers, as Jacobs, try to convince readers that “they were the neither the victims nor the faller women that stereotypes have labelled them” (Morgan 90). Thus, Jacobs focused on the incapability of becoming the woman they were expected to be, and she mentions some unachievable characteristics for any woman, regardless of race. By contrast male writers try to emphasize their manhood

during their road to freedom, and that is why the repetition of scenes where courage and literacy are needed fill male narratives in order to magnify their role as men. Consequently, despite the repetitive pattern and the similar description of cruelties, the attempts to escape, the bad living conditions and the unsafe work environment, authors have a different purpose depending on their gender.

5. Works cited

Andrews, William L. "How to read a Slave Narrative" Freedom's Story, TeacherServe.

National Humanities Center. 22/01/2019. Retrieved from:

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slavenarrative.htm>

Cotesworth Pickney. *The Lady's Token, Or Gift of Friendship*. Published by J.

Buffum, 1 Jan. 1848. Retrieved from:

archive.org/details/ladystokenorgif00pincgoog/page/n6.

Cruea, Susan M. *Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century*

Woman Movement (2005). General Studies Writing Faculty Publications.

Dacia Green. *Ain't I...?: The Dehumanizing Effect of the Regulation of Slave Womanhood and Family Life*. *25 Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 191-220 (2018)

<https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djglp/vol25/iss2/2>

Davis, Charles T., and Henry L. Gates. *The Slaves Narrative*. Oxford University Press, 1990.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*.

Written by himself. Retrived from:

http://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Douglass/Narrative/Douglass_Narrative.pdf

Jacobs, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Edited by Lydia Maria Child and Jean Fagan. Yellin, Harvard University Press, 2000.

Johnson, Yvonne. *The Voices of African American Women: the Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*. P. Lang, 1999.

Jones, Anne Goodwyn. *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. University Press of Virginia, 2011.

Morgan, Winifred. "Gender-Related Difference in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass." *American Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1994, pp. 73–94. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40642688.

Savitt, Todd Lee. *Medicine and Slavery: the Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*. University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Taylor, Wayne. *The Terrible Time: the Civil War in Kentuckys Bell, Knox, Laurel, & Whitley Counties*. W. Taylor, 2004.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151–174. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2711179

White, Deborah G. *Arnt I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. Norton, 1998.

Williams, Heather Andrea. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Woloch, Nancy. *Women and the American Experience*. McGraw-Hill, 1994.
<https://archive.org/details/womenamericanex00wolo>

