

Notes for: Harriet Ann Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

- ❖ Autobiography assumes that individuals' lives are of interest to us. That may seem an obvious point, but consider how few autobiographies, as we understand the term, were written before the 18th century. Partly this was due to a generalized lack of education (if you can't read/write, you will probably not write an autobiography (unless you dictate it)); partly this was due to the availability and the cost of printing (even if you had written an autobiography, you would have had to find a printer and be able to afford one. It may also be that people were not taught to regard their lives to be of common interest, i.e. the life of an individual was not that important. The coming of modernity changed our way of thinking about individuals. This isn't to say that modern political and cultural systems always liberate people or clearly, that is not the case (cf. Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism). Rather, modern systems take note of individuals, take them seriously, in ways that the old system did not. 1984, for example, is a story about a political system (personified by Big Brother) that "notices" individuals and crushes them for being individual.
- ❖ Ben Franklin's Autobiography, is an explanation of how and why he lived his life the way he did; what he made of the opportunities afforded him. Franklin's story is one of coming, by means of reason, to greater and greater freedom of self-expression or self creation.
 - Freedom is necessary for self-expression. Without freedom there is no choice. Without choice, the ability to do this rather than that, to experience this rather than that. We cannot self-create or self-determine. Our civil rights are essentially the necessary preconditions for self-creation.
- ❖ Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, is also a story of coming to freedom. However, unlike Franklin Jacobs faced a political and economic system that did not recognize her as an individual; as a person; but as an object or thing.
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 - Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831) was a philosopher, who addressed the nature of "being," e.g. asking what, if anything, it means "to be"; "to exist." Hegel's questions about being and his

answers to those questions preoccupied (and continue to do so) philosophers of being and of politics--most famously, perhaps. Karl Marx. Hegel articulated a theory of being that defined a distinction between people who work and things that they worked upon.

- It is the nature of things that they are not free. Things are for people to work upon; to use as expressions of or means to our freedom; our self-creation. For example, wood is used to make lumber; lumber to make shelter; shelter allows us freedom from the elements.
- Hegel noted that people often work upon other people, i.e. treat them as things to be worked upon. Slaves, for example, work the fields. This produces cotton. Cotton is sold. This brings money. Money allows the master to make choices, i.e. purchase books that, say, provide pleasure (novels) or that allow them to better understand the cultivating of cotton; or to purchase horses that allow greater freedom of travel and of comfort and so on.
- Hegel believed that treating people as objects was wrong. It is a misunderstanding of what people are and of one's relation to other people. He discussed this misunderstanding in terms of a Master/Slave dialectic.
 - Dialectic comes from a Greek word for conversation--more importantly coming to knowledge through a critical exchange of ideas. The Socratic method is dialectical in that it produces knowledge through a critical exchange between people. The master/slave relationship is dialectical because it, too, represents an exchange of ideas--about the nature of freedom. However, unlike the Socratic dialectic, only one person gains knowledge in the master/slave dialectic, the slave.
- Hegel pointed out that treating people as slaves is a false relation. Only things can be slaves for us. For "masters" to treat other people as things, as slaves, is to live in error. Slaves, on the other hand, have a superior understanding of themselves and of their masters. Slaves recognize both as people.
- This understanding; this clear vision if you will; provides the slave with a superior understanding of the relationship between master and slave, i.e. that they are in reality equals. Being equals, the master cannot legitimately take the slave's work (her ability to transform things) from her.

- This understanding is itself a form of rebellion. To realize one is free is to rebel. To act upon this realization is a form of political rebellion. Rebellion, however, poses the question—will the slave repeat the mistakes of the master? Depressingly, Hegel concluded that was far too often the case.
 - **QUESTIONS:**
 - ◆ Trace and discuss Jacobs' rebellion against slavery.
 - ◆ How is Jacobs' final owner like Mr. Flint?