

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs

by  
Mary E. Lyons

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### Book Information

Mary E. Lyons, Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs

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142 Pages

Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: MG

A fictionalized version of the life of Harriet Jacobs is told in the form of letters that she might have written during her slavery in North Carolina and as she prepared for escape to the North in 1842.

**Award:** Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books

**Topics:** Adventure, Escape; People, African American; People, Slaves; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; U.S. States/Regions, North Carolina

### Main Characters

Aunt Betty a strong supporter of Harriet, who worked as a slave in the Norcom household

Cornelia Willis the second wife of Nathaniel Willis, who hates slavery and protects Harriet after learning the Messmores are looking for her

Daddy (Daniel Jacobs) Harriet's father, who tells his children to hate slavery

Doctor Norcom Mary Matilda's father, who makes unwanted advances toward Harriet and who continues to search for her until his death

Elizabeth Horniblow Miss Margaret's mother, who owns the rest of Harriet's family after Miss Margaret's death

Gran (Molly Horniblow) Harriet's grandmother who has watched over Harriet and John as they grew and who provides a hiding place in her house for seven years for Harriet, raising Harriet's two children after their father buys them from Dr. Norcom

Harriet Jacobs the principal character and author of the letters, who struggles throughout her lifetime to be free of slavery and to help others

John Harriet's younger brother who, like his father, hates slavery

Joseph Jacob Harriet's son, fathered by Samuel Sawyer

Louisa Jacob Harriet's daughter, fathered by Samuel Sawyer

Luna Widow Blount's maid, who looks after Harriet while she is hiding at the house

Mama (Delilah) Harriet's dead mother to whom she addresses her letters in the first part of the book

Maria Norcom the wife of Doctor Norcom, who blocks the Doctor's plan to make Harriet sleep in the room with him

Martha Blount a woman who permits Harriet to hide in her house for several months

Mary Matilda the daughter of Doctor Norcom to whom Miss Margaret leaves Harriet in her will and who marries Daniel Messmore

Miss Hannah the sister of Elizabeth Horniblow, who purchases Gran and Uncle Mark at the public auction

Miss Margaret Horniblow a slave-owner who promises to look after Harriet when Harriet's mama dies, later leaving Harriet to her niece, Mary Matilda, in her will

Nathaniel Parker Willis a man for whose family Harriet works as nursemaid when she first reaches New York

R. a young free-born man Harriet meets at a dance and with whom she falls in love

Samuel Sawyer the white father of Harriet's two children, Joseph and Louisa

Uncle Joseph an uncle who has run to freedom and who gives Harriet inspiration to pursue the fight for freedom for herself and her children

Uncle Mark Harriet's uncle who makes a place for her above Gran's storage room

Uncle Stephen Aunt Betty's husband, who hides Harriet on the boat between her time at Widow Blount's and Gran's

### Vocabulary

**abolitionist** a person trying to end the practice of slavery

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**fugitive** someone who runs from something or tries to escape

**pseudonym** a fictitious name used in place of a real name; a pen name

**vulgar** morally crude, coarse or offensive

### Synopsis

*Letters from a Slave Girl* is a fictional account of the life of Harriet Jacobs as told through her private letters. Miss Margaret Horniblow promises Harriet's dying mother that she will care for Harriet. Miss Margaret keeps her promise, teaching Harriet to read and spell and sew. When Miss Margaret dies, Harriet expects Miss Margaret's will to give her her freedom. Instead, Miss Margaret leaves Harriet to her three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom.

Harriet works in the Norcom household alongside Aunt Betty. While working there, Harriet persuades Gran to let her attend her first dance. Here she meets R., a young, free-born man, with whom she falls in love. The Doctor refuses to give her permission to marry R. Instead, Harriet tries to avoid the unwanted advances of Doctor Norcom. When his wife stops his plan, he has a cottage built in which he wants Harriet to live. Harriet has a child with another white man, Samuel Sawyer, believing she will discourage the Doctor's unwanted attentions.

After Harriet has her second child with Samuel Sawyer, the Doctor promises to make out free papers for her children if she moves to the cottage he built for her. When she refuses the offer, he sends her to his son's plantation. Harriet devises a plan to free her children from Norcom. She escapes from the Auburn Plantation and goes into hiding. Several months later, the Doctor unwittingly sells her children to their father. For the next seven years, the Doctor continues to search for Harriet while she hides in Edenton. After nine years, she is forced to move away from Edenton before her hiding place is betrayed.

She travels North and takes a job with the Willis family in New York. After years of worrying about

being caught, Harriet's and her children's freedom is bought by Mr. Willis's second wife. An abolitionist convinces Harriet to submit articles to a New York paper telling about her life. She follows up with a book that tells her entire story.

She spends the rest of her life working to help her people. With the help of Louisa, she finds homes for orphaned children, gives out food and clothing to those in need, and starts schools, nursing homes and orphanages. Harriet is remembered for her strong character and tender heart.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Harriet decides she must do something that will help make her children free rather than waiting for Samuel to make them free. Why does she come to this conclusion?

*When she makes this decision, she feels the opportune time is running out. Samuel has made promises several times, but he has not made good on them.*

#### Literary Analysis

How might the reader's response to the book change if the author had written the first two sections in the same style as the last section?

*The answer will probably reflect that the style would make it less personal to the reader. In that style, less of Harriet's personal feelings would come through, and the reader may not be as likely to identify with Harriet's actions.*

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### Inferential Comprehension

The doctor spent much time and money trying to locate Harriet after she escaped. Why was it so important for him to find her?

*He viewed losing her like losing some property or an investment. He probably felt a greater urgency to find her since she had managed to avoid his attentions.*

### Constructing Meaning

Think of someone who reminds you of Harriet. Describe how this person is like Harriet.

*Harriet puts freedom and family first. She fights for what she believes in, and she is resourceful.*

only way to prevent Norcom from selling her children is to run away. For seven years, she hides in Gran's attic. Because her hiding place may have been compromised, she goes North. She finally becomes a free woman several years after she has been in the North. Think of how Harriet's life would have been different if her freedom had been bought while she was hiding at Gran's. Write a story that follows Harriet's life after she became free.

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The Civil War broke out after Harriet moved North. Read a book about the contributions black soldiers made to the Civil War. Share what you read.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** When Harriet is with the Willis family, she finds the name of Daniel Messmore, the husband of Mary Matilda, in the newspaper column, "Arrivals at City Hotels." Mrs. Willis sends Harriet to New Bedford, Massachusetts, because she does not want Messmore to locate Harriet. To make Harriet look less conspicuous, she sends the baby with her. Write five journal entries Harriet might have written to Mrs. Willis during her time in New Bedford.

**Understanding Sequence** Harriet spent her life attempting to become free and to see her children freed. As a result, she runs away from the plantation and goes into hiding. When her hiding place may be revealed, she escapes North. Eventually, she does become free and dedicates the rest of her life to helping those seeking freedom. On a piece of posterboard, make a timeline of key events in Harriet's life. Write a short paragraph about each event next to the marking on the timeline for that event.

**Responding to Literature** Harriet decides the