Charity Fischer

Eleanor Hannah

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Summary

*Fear of Insurrection* is an excerpt from the autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* written by a former slave by the name of Harriet Jacobs. She began practicing her writing after her escape North in 1842, and her manuscript was completed in 1858. Though the subject of her memoir as a whole was the sexual abuse and exploitation of female slaves, she writes here about the abuse suffered by all blacks, male or female, slave or free, which began at the time of Nat Turner’s slave rebellion that began on August 21, 1831, and lasted for weeks thereafter. While this excerpt is not on the main theme of Jacobs’ memoir, she uses this section of her story to inform her readers of the blind violence enacted against those with fewer rights by those who considered themselves in control and sought to keep control. She uses great detail and first hand observations to show the brutality of slavery. As Jacobs’ editor put it, “This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features” (Child).

At the beginning of this excerpt she speaks of the coming storm, saying she heard of the rebellion which “threw our town into great commotion” (Jacobs). It was common in this period for an annual assembly of white troops, rich and poor, to be made. This muster was commonly treated as a holiday, and its usual purpose was for posturing and inspection. This time it was secreted as a force to squash any remaining rebellion in the black community. She implies that every black was affected by this purpose, even those with no reason of suspicion, and that location and more importantly skin color were the defining factors in a person’s punishment.

She states she was very fortunate when her home was invaded by the militia, as the only things stolen were a few clothes things and the only damage done was against what little writings she had which were ripped into pieces. Her safety was more secure when she asked a friendly white from the neighborhood into her home during the search. That evening, however, the rabble, under the influence of alcohol, furthered their violence and threat of violence. She heard cries and shouts into the night and, being too cautious to cross her threshold, peeked under her curtain and saw a group of black people being led at gunpoint by the increasingly aggressive mob of country bullies.

Over the course of the following weeks, she daily saw blacks being mistreated and injured for the sake of crushing rebellion. There were some whites who used their social and racial position to protect those arrested for suspected conspiracy, lobbying to have them put in jail instead of moving them on to judgment. During the weeks after the inciting rebellion, a day and night watch was set up, a black church was demolished, and a section was set apart in the white church for those still seeking a place to worship.

Evaluation

Nat was a slave who believed it was his God-given duty by revelation to free his brothers in chains. The rebellion and the freeing of the slaves resulted in the death of approximately 60 white persons. The response from those whites in control was outrage, then to assemble the militia and to treat any and all black people with suspicion. They acted as judges and executioners, a concept to which Jacobs responded: “What a spectacle was that for a civilized country!” (Jacobs). In the weeks that followed, black families who lived in more isolated areas were at greater risk of being framed, then punished for conspiring. As Jacobs writes, “[We] were in the midst of white families who would protect us” (Jacobs). There was great suffering in the black community at this time as Jacobs’ implication is that age, gender, and walk of life was of no concern to those meting out punishment: “Every [sic] where men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet” (Jacobs). She also describes some of the brutal treatment given to those arrested, despite her claim that “Nothing at all was proved against the colored people, bond or free” (Jacobs). This observation from Jacobs highlights the whites’ desperate and violent desire to keep their property under their control. For weeks after the rebellion there was a terrible race to secure the most profitable asset most southern plantations had—their slaves.

White southerners were quick to suppress the uprising but were terrified of another insurrection and enacted laws across the southern states for the purpose of removing rights from black citizens, free or enslaved. Slavery had been practiced in America since settlers first found profit in it, but our common American perception of the treatment of those owned as merchandise is largely based on the period after these laws were put in place. It tells a modern reader of the few rights that slaves and free people had just before those rights were stripped away.

The race for a profit in the midst of the industrial revolution made the working conditions for the average slave more difficult than they already were. And when a man could see another as property, it was not difficult for every terrible act, up to and including murder, to be perpetrated against them. The fear of rebellion, even weeks after the rebellion was squashed, and in the years after Nat Turner was executed, resulted in overall suspicion and mistreatment of black people.

More than 150 years after black people gained the same rights as citizens, there is still a racist element that thinks otherwise. Judgment by the color of one’s skin has been stripped from our laws, but there are those who will not give it up. When it was in the law to dominate over another, it was common practice to mistreat other human beings. When this domination was threatened, they did everything in their power to gain some leverage over them. And even after those who kept slaves were long gone, the opinions of some whites towards those of different heritage may still be negatively manifested both minor and major ways.