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## The Changing Role of the Woman in America

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In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the author creates a fictional world based upon her observations of slavery in the southern states of America. Taking true events experienced by slaves and pairing them with characters of her own creation, the author is able to compose a piece that exposes the evils of slavery in the United States. Specifically, Stowe strongly develops her female characters and their importance as mothers within her text in order to emphasize this point. While the men within her novel come to represent the slave holding tradition, Stowe looks to female sensitivity to convey the heartbreaking reality of the practice. The legacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the feminist point of view is complex and requires an understanding of the social and political climate in which it was written as well as how this climate has evolved throughout time. While Stowe's depiction of the confidant mother figure was considered very progressive at its date of publication (1852), this characterization is considered very limiting within today's society. Stowe's picture of motherhood is now viewed by many feminist scholars as incomplete and disempowering to the modern woman.

The view of "the woman" held within society during the period in which Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* directly influenced the characterization of the females within her text. According to E. Ann Kaplan, author of *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, Stowe had to mold her characters to fit the "certain demands...[of her novel's] intended female audience" (Kaplan, 127). During the 1900's, women were not recognized outside of the home, and were absent from the political sphere. This world of the "public" was reserved for the men and husbands, while the women dominated the realm of the "private". A woman's success was measured by her ability to care for her family and maintain Christian values within the household. The role as a mother was the most important position a woman could have, and she existed as the nucleus of the family. With this historical context in mind, the feminist scholar Mary McCartin Wearn, author of *Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, states that "as an antebellum woman writer, Stowe's only claim to authority and her only means of establishing cultural credibility [was] via the role of motherhood" (Wearn, 18). Stowe utilizes the figure of the mother to create characters that her audience could identify with; her audience consisting of mostly white middle class women. Though the reader in 1852 may have been familiar with the iconic Christian mother within literature, Stowe makes her female characters unique because of the power and influence they are given over their surroundings. According to Wearn, "Stowe specifically envisions 'maternal devotion' as a type of personal empowerment" where the female is made stronger due to her maternal instincts (Wearn, 22).

Stowe's novel is considered to be a progressive text as women assert their roles as "moral centers" in order to cultivate social and political change. A character that powerfully demonstrates this is Mrs. Bird. Stowe is very careful in her description of Mrs. Bird, explaining that in contrast to her seemingly gentle nature, "anything in the shape of cruelty would throw her into a passion" (Stowe, 68). Mrs. Bird is more complex than the submissive iconic female figure. In her own home, Mrs. Bird acts as a sort of moral leader for her family and demonstrates a

certain amount of control over her husband through her emotional sensitivity. When discussing legislation that would outlaw white southerners from aiding traveling slaves, Mrs. Bird chastises her husband's lack of Christian kindness by saying that it "is a shameful, wicked, abominable law" and she would break it if she had the chance (Stowe 68). Mrs. Bird speaks out against her husband who represents the United States government in his occupation as a senator. Using Mrs. Bird's role as a mother figure makes the character very much in tune with what is morally just, and it is this quality that allows her to openly condemn the decisions made by men and the government itself. Mrs. Bird's power over her husband's actions is ultimately confirmed by the fact that Mr. Bird begrudgingly agrees to assist Eliza by taking her to a safe house during her travels to Canada. In Wearn's opinion, Mrs. Bird acts as a sort of "moral tutor in the scene" and "disciplines her husband to judge with his heart rather than his head" (Wearn, 26). According to Martha L. Henning, the author of *Beyond Understanding: Appeals to the Imagination, Passions, and Will in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Woman's Fiction*, this instance ultimately demonstrates Stowe's "promotion of the nineteenth-century feminist responsibility to [right the] world's wrongs" through the maternal instinct (Henning, 85).

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was considered a revolutionary novel in the 1900's with regards to female representation; in particular, Stowe's description was extremely unique in its new treatment of the black woman. In Stowe's text, the author goes against the traditional understanding of women slaves as animals, and instead depicts them as feeling human beings. In her feminist text, Wearn explains that the author "contradicts a vision of black womanhood that imagined female slaves merely as a means of production in the slave-holding south; Stowe endows [black mothers] with the natural instincts of motherhood, a characteristics at the time deemed "white", even in the north" (Wearn, 20). An example of Stowe's redefinition of the black female can be seen in the character of Eliza. Eliza is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Shelby and works as a slave within their home. Through the Christian teachings of Mrs. Shelby, Eliza possesses many of the same qualities displayed by her mistress. Eliza is shown as an intelligent mother, with a strong sense of what is good and bad. When her husband George informs his wife that he will escape to Canada, Eliza encourages him to "have faith" and to believe that God is doing his very best" (Stowe, 16). Even in a time of hardship for her family, Eliza is able to look to God for strength and guide her husband in the direction of Christian goodness. In Henning's text she argues that the author emphasizes Eliza's "Christian sentiment" and "courage to maintain a sense of justice and Christian duty"; Stowe shows her audience that though a black slave, motherhood empowers Eliza to be the moral center of her own family (Henning, 92). Like white women, she is uniquely in tune with God and Christian values because of a primal maternal instinct. As the story continues, Stowe further contradicts the traditional representation of the slave through this character's resolve to change her situation when her son is placed in danger. When Mr. Shelby agrees to sell Eliza's son Harry, Eliza takes her situation into her own hands and decides to escape. When overhearing this conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, Eliza comments to herself that "they may have sold [little Harry], but [his mother] will save [him] yet" (Stowe, 32). Eliza's ability to escape undetected from the residence proves her wit and intelligence as a human being. Eliza is not the submissive black slave, but a competent female with the power to change her situation.

While Stowe's depiction of both black and white woman in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was extremely revolutionary for the time in which it was written, many modern feminist scholars find the characterization to be inaccurate and limiting. The way that this text is currently perceived is a direct reflection of the changing role of the woman throughout history. While in the 1900's the

female's domain was confined to the home, the modern woman exists in a public sphere and is encouraged to develop herself beyond the tradition of homemaking. In the world today, females enjoy the right to become involved in politics, study at the university, and compete for powerful jobs; the perception of the woman's role has evolved greatly throughout time, as society emphasizes motherhood less and focuses more on success outside of the home. In a contemporary view, those women who choose to stay at home with their families are often seen as submissive and traditional. In *Negotiating Motherhood in Ninetieth-Century American Literature*, feminist author Mary McCartin Wearn comments that while Stowe was wise to use her knowledge of motherhood to identify with her target audience, the modern woman has to suffer the consequences of such a highly sympathetic depiction. In her text Wearn explains that while [Stowe's] solution places motherhood at the center of the national project, her maneuvers come at great cost in terms of imagining female subjectivity and individual agency" (Wearn, 18). It is Stowe's legacy of the highly moral and motherly female that feminists of today's society are forced to overcome.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the author's focus on the sentimental female leads to an over-exaggeration of her character's sympathetic qualities. Stowe develops the mother's maternal sensibility with such intensity that she actually places her characters in a negative light; the women characters are so controlled by their maternal instincts that they become "overly emotional", and at times lack all reason and rationality. To Martha L. Henning, Stowe too often appeals to "the imagination and passion...through the vehicle of sympathy", making her females appear one dimensional (Henning, 92). A character that exhibits this quality is the black slave Cassy. Cassy retells her traumatic history to Uncle Tom, and laments over the loss of her children to the slave trade. Cassy explains that after her master refused to help her save her son from a severe beating, "something inside of [her] head snapped", and she came at her master with a "great sharp bowing knife" found on the table (Stowe, 310). Cassy's maternal instincts are so strong and felt with such intensity that it makes her dangerous and capable of murder. According to Wearn, when a female "loses a mother's proper control of her children" she thereby loses the "appropriate self-control of womanhood" (Wearn, 35). Though this strong appeal to emotion was effective in cultivating sympathy for Stowe's cause, the consequence of such a description is the representation of women as "hyper emotional", unreasonable beings. Wearn comments that "Stowe [is unable] to imagine a positive feminine power beyond the patriarchally defined realm of legitimate Christian motherhood", leading the author to place too much emphasis on this role within her novel (Wearn, 40). Later in her text, Stowe again takes her descriptions to an extreme when the character of Cassy takes the life of her son so that he will not have to endure the hardship of slavery. She tells Uncle Tom that when her child was born she "kissed him and cried over him; and then...gave him laudanum" (Stowe, 310). Cassy's ability to make rational and reasonable decisions is severely impaired due to the love that she feels for her child. To the modern woman, Stowe's representation of the mother is incomplete and makes the female appear weak and irrational due to a dangerous excess of feelings.

Stowe's female characters continue to limit the modern woman because of their dependency on a more vulnerable "other"; it is only through the female's desire to protect or aid a weaker being that they are able to become powerful figures within the text. Wearn asserts that the author's inability to cultivate power within the woman as an individual makes it so that her females are not truly "agents of their own destiny" (Wearn, 22). An interesting example of this point is the character of the slave mother Eliza. To the reader in 1852, Eliza appears to be a powerful character that has control over her surroundings and the power to change her

circumstances. However, when considered from a current feminist perspective, this character's power does not come from the inner self but instead relies entirely upon her defenseless child. When Eliza's boy is not threatened and she is secure in her position within the Shelby residence, Eliza is content to be a slave. She speaks with her husband, explaining to him that in order to be a Christian, she must "obey her master and mistress" (Stowe, 16). The mother is happy to be owned by the white family and has no motivation to change her situation for her own well-being. It is only when Eliza feels a responsibility to save her son that she is moved to action. Discovering Mr. Shelby's plan for Little Harry, Eliza makes the decision to escape; she explains to her son that she will "put on [his] cap and coat and run off with him, so the ugly man can't catch him" (Stowe, 32). The modern reader is understanding of the maternal devotion felt by this character, yet troubled by the author's failure to develop her women beyond this traditional role. While Stowe does give this black woman slave a sense of power never before seen in American literature, the description of Eliza falls short by current standards and this legacy serves to disempower the female of today's society.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is inarguably one of the most influential books in American literature. This being so, the legacy of female representation that Stowe has created continues to be analyzed as the novel is studied by modern scholars. As the role of the female continues to evolve in differing political and social climates throughout time, Stowe's novel can be a source of tension for the modern feminist trying to break through the traditional vision of women as the sympathetic mother figure. However, though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be an incomplete depiction of the modern female, the scholar must recognize that in her own time Stowe's work was considered revolutionary for taking steps toward finding the female voice and asserting female independence.

Works Cited

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