

# Depiction of female gender in uncle tom's cabin

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This essay will be an exploration of how femininity is portrayed in Uncle Tom's Cabin, a controversial anti-slavery novel by Harriet Beecher-Stowe, which was first published in 1851. Femininity is portrayed as being hugely affected by the effect slavery had on the structure of a family, in all parts of society; slavery was a highly patriarchal system, affecting everything from maternal instincts to the moral awareness of women.

One of the reasons why Uncle Tom's Cabin caused such controversy at the time it was first published is the way in which Beecher-Stowe places her female characters on a higher moral platform in the novel than her male characters. Although the major change towards socio-political rights for women occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, after the novel was written, the female characters are almost entirely portrayed as morally, religiously and socially aware. The white women in the novel who are portrayed as intellectually superior to their husbands are Mrs Bird and Legree's mother, whilst Eliza epitomises these qualities for black women. In cases such as Cassy murdering her child and by doing so, breaking this pattern of women possessing a perfect moral code, Beecher-Stowe presents these actions as a product of the slavery system rather than an inherently inadequate moral code. Whilst it is important not to disregard characters such as Marie and Ophelia, as they are not perfect examples of good moral citizens, displaying qualities such as emotional cruelty and harbouring prejudice against others, Uncle Tom's Cabin advocates a good sense of morality across the female gender, encouraging the abandonment of traditional stereotypes, particularly for black women.

The first example of the effect that slavery had on maternal instincts is seen in Cassy, a highly intelligent slave and mistress to Legree. In Cassy's relaying of her tragic past to Uncle Tom, she focuses on her children being taken from her and sold into slavery, explaining how she became aware of her maternal instincts when her master would not help her son: "something inside of my head snapped". The prospect of a life of slavery for her children made her maternal instincts far stronger than they might otherwise have been, causing Cassy to lose all self-control and moral awareness, driving her to consider murder by wielding a knife at her master; it is the point at which Cassy loses control over her children due to slavery that she also loses control of her natural, feminine instincts. To a modern readership, this representation of women would most likely be received as biased, as the author portrays Cassy to be illogical and emotionally frail due entirely to feminine feelings, rather than it being due in part to her situation. Beecher-Stowe portrays Cassy's maternal instincts in what could be perceived as a negative light; she is shown as being so sentimental that her sympathetic qualities are more obvious to the reader than her intelligence or rationality. However, it is important to note here that Cassy later murders her son out of kindness, telling Uncle Tom that she gave him a fatal dose of opium shortly after he was born to save him from spending the rest of his life as a slave, which in her mind was on a par with death. Ironically, this clearly shows that Cassy has no ability for logical thought processes in the context of understanding the true welfare of her child, due to an excess of maternal instincts brought on by such an extreme situation.

Another pivotal female character in the novel is Eliza Harris, a slave who is a maid to Mrs Shelby; Beecher-Stowe uses Eliza as a vehicle to redefine traditional ideas surrounding black women, presenting them as humans with emotions rather than merely animals. The most obvious way in which she does this is to portray Eliza as having many of the same qualities as her mistress; she is taught to have a strong moral awareness and to be a devout Christian. However, this may be more due to her natural instincts rather than having the ideas imprinted on her by living in a Christian household. In a similar way to Cassy, Eliza's situation has increased her maternal instincts, something which further allows the author to portray black women as intelligent, and able to resolve a situation. An example of this is when Mr Shelby threatens to sell Eliza's son, and Eliza resolves the situation for herself by planning an escape for them both: " they have sold you, but your mother will save you yet!". This shows that Eliza has the same level of competency as any aristocratic white woman, as she is able to plan and escape from the Shelby's property without being seen, redefining the traditionally accepted role of a submissive black woman in slavery.

One particularly controversial and complex character is Ophelia St. Clare, Beecher-Stowe's main tool for making her readership sympathise with the character's prejudiced views and, as she did, reform their thoughts and begin to treat slaves as human beings rather than animals. It is possible to consider that Beecher-Stowe based the character of Ophelia on what she conceived her target readership to be: racially prejudiced people from the North who opposed slavery in the somewhat abstract sense that it was morally skewed, but felt such disgust when in the presence of black people

that the aforementioned opposition could never progress any further than the abstract. Like Ophelia, this prejudice originated primarily from spending only minimal time in the presence of slaves, rather than it being based on fact or first-hand experience. It is also significant to note that Ophelia is an advocate for women's ability to significantly improve their moral standards, suggesting a level of intelligence in women that traditional stereotypes did not compensate for; once Ophelia is put in the position of spending considerable lengths of time with Topsy, she develops a sense of duty to teach her Christian values, as one might toward a child. Eventually Ophelia becomes completely reformed and views Topsy as a human being; the death of Eva was the peripeteic moment at which she overcame the prejudices typical of Beecher-Stowe's audience.

Mrs Bird is also a crucial character to the controversial nature of the novel, as she represents a woman with Christian morals willing to assist anyone regardless of their skin colour. She is a representation of the fact that whilst women were prized highly for their physical beauty over everything else, they had the often unacknowledged ability to take charge of a situation; Mrs Bird is described as being "the very picture of delight" at the same time as she was "superintending the arrangements of the table". Through this portrayal of women having multiple dimensions, Uncle Tom's Cabin becomes a particularly progressive text that encourages drastic changes in the social stratification of the time. It is also important to note that Mrs Bird, aside from being portrayed as possessing a great amount of physical beauty, has intelligence that allows her to emotionally manipulate her husband, with a complete disregard of the stereotypical ideal that a woman should be

submissive to men. This transforms Mrs Bird into a rather complex moral leader who is thrown “ into a passion” by “ anything in the shape of cruelty” towards another human being, black or white. The control that Mrs Bird has over her husband is a subtle one, done by emotional rather than physical means, and an example of this is when the discussion takes place between Mrs Bird and her husband with regards to the new law that states Southerners will no longer be allowed to offer assistance to slaves travelling through their land, stating that the law is “ shameful, wicked” and “ abominable”. This is a particularly revelatory moment in the novel as by contradicting the political opinions of her husband, Mrs Bird actually contradicts the US government in its entirety, as her husband holds the post of Senator. However, Mrs Bird’s morality is represented most effectively a little later in the chapter, when Harry and Eliza ask for a place to stay for the night before continuing their journey as runaways; she does not ask for the approval of her husband before allowing Harry and Eliza inside, instead encouraging them and making sure that “ no reference was made on either side, to the preceding conversation”. This clearly demonstrated to Beecher-Stowe’s readership that women had the ability to employ an intelligent initiative and, whilst not completely disregarding their traditional roles as white middle-class women, have the ability to influence their husbands in the quest towards the Abolitionist movement. However, as this would have been such an extremely controversial idea for the time, Beecher-Stowe allowed some of the old stereotypes for female behaviour to remain; stating that whilst Mrs Bird was firm in her own opinions, “ her husband and children were her entire world”. Most importantly, she explains to her female

readership that the best way in which a woman can hope to influence her husband is by subtle means: "...she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or by argument". This also reinforces the argument that women possessed a level of intelligence significant enough to rival men, as Mrs Bird possessed the ability to remain calm and rational whilst articulating a persuasive argument.

White women are portrayed as having a wide-reaching influence in the novel, not just within the confines of their own family unit but within the slave community as well; in the absence of a moral female figure in a home, the moral well-being of the men in the home is affected. An example of this is the description of the plantation kept by Legree, a man who treated his slaves cruelly and with no respect; Beecher-Stowe described the establishment as having " that peculiar sickening, unwholesome smell, compounded of mingled damp, dirt and decay", and states that Legree's dogs " had encamped themselves among them, to suit their own taste and convenience". The female presence on the plantation is limited only to a slave woman who is as morally and physically unkempt as Legree himself, resulting in a lack of compassion and Christian values. By using Legree as an example of what can happen without the presence of a pious woman, Beecher-Stowe creates an awareness in her readership that squalor and cruelty are counterparts to a lack of female influence.

To conclude, the revolutionary representation of the female gender in Uncle Tom's Cabin as having high levels of intelligence, Christian values and moral reasoning made it one of the most controversial books written. By presenting

parallels between the repression of black slaves and women, Beecher-Stowe places doubt in the minds of the audience over the moral countenance of the men in charge of the patriarchal slavery system. Even though women are used primarily to advocate a change in the traditionally accepted roles of women, the roles of men are also questioned and women's inferiority is placed under scrutiny; women were having the greatest effect on the men in positions of power, yet societal norms stated that they should remain submissive to men. Uncle Tom's Cabin is a novel in which the representation of the female characters forms a strong example of early Feminist ideas, allowing women to adopt gradually more power over political matters in the future and, in turn, providing fuel for the Abolitionist movement.