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## Power of the Weaker: Feminism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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**U***NCLE TOM'S CABIN* is one of the most famous and influential

American novels of the 19th Century and even in the world today. Other than its political influence on the abolition of slavery, the idea of female power is also embedded in this book. As a supporter of essentialist feminism, Harriet Beecher Stowe believes that the familial and social duties of males and females are essentially different and that they should play their gender roles accordingly; that is, women are supposed to be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. With such a belief in mind, it is not surprising to see that Stowe makes most of her female characters possess the traditional gender traits that the society has expected of them. While this arrangement might seem unacceptable for some feminists nowadays, I find it reasonable and useful in terms of advocating the power of women. It helps Stowe present how these gender traits that are exclusive to females empower them and allow them to influence the society in ways men cannot. Stowe does this successfully by placing women in various important occasions and making their actions the determining factors of the fate of others. One can view these empowered female characters as models which Stowe expects her readers to become: when men fail to step out to defend the damned race, these women, though seemingly timid and frail, act boldly out of their kind, soft hearts and take chances to preserve the humanity left in this society.

After its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* elicited emotion and sympathy of more and more people who supported the abolition of slavery. There is no doubt that it is a powerful novel, of which the source of power — that is, the power of women — is unexpected at the time. Jane P.

Tompkins says in her essay, “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History,”

Stowe means to effect a radical transformation of her society. The brilliance of the strategy is that it puts the central affirmations of a culture into the service of a vision that would destroy the present economic and social institutions; by resting her ease, absolutely, on the saving power of Christian love and on the sanctity of American life, placing it not in the government, nor in the courts of law, nor in the factories, not in the marketplace but in the kitchen. (Tompkins 575)

To illustrate her point, Stowe chooses to ignite this “radical transformation” of the society “in the kitchen,” a place that resembles the role of women in the family. As the head of domestic affairs, women have certain power within the household, which includes the influence they have on the behavior of house servants.

Stowe first illustrates the effect of this kind of power with Mrs. Shelby, who is unwilling to sell Tom and Harry. Being aware of his Mistress’ attitude toward Eliza’s escape, Sam shows great exuberance on his way to the horse-post: he “began to bestir himself in real earnest, and after a while appeared, bearing down gloriously towards the house, with Bill and Jerry in a full canter, and adroitly throwing himself off before they had any idea of stopping, he brought them up alongside of the horse post like a tornado” (Stowe 51). “Bestir,” “earnest,” “adroitly,” “throwing himself off,” and “like a tornado” impress us with the speed of his movements; they bring out a sense of force and excitement. Overwhelmed with the thrill brought by this series of actions, however, one can easily overlook the real source of this power. Though completed by Sam, Mrs. Shelby is the one who instigates this series of action. If one is to argue that this connection is too ambiguous and vague, a more obvious, direct demonstration of Mrs. Shelby’s power is her insinuating to Sam “don’t ride too fast” with “a low voice and strong emphasis” (52). Another example of her influential power is when the servants knowingly delay the preparation for dinner as, “[f]or some singular reason, an impression seemed to reign among the servants generally that Missis would not be particularly disobliged by delay; ... a number of counter accidents occurred constantly, to retard the course of things” (59). If not with Mrs. Shelby’s acquiescence, the servants certainly do not dare to prepare the meal in such leisurely a manner or to let “accidents occur constantly.”

This agreement among the servants implies Mrs. Shelby's power in the household, which helps her acquire more time for Eliza.

Back in the nineteenth century, some feminine traits were expected of women if they were to be considered ideal. Stowe contends that these traits, though they make women seem "weaker" relative to men, can be turned into a form of power which is almost invisible so that people hardly notice. While exerting her power through the actions of Sam and other servants, Mrs. Shelby remembers to "do her part" when circumstances require; she warmly attends Mr. Haley with her feminine power both before and after dinner. When Mr. Haley's horse is startled, Mrs. Shelby "came forward and courteously expressing her concern for Haley's accidents, pressed him to stay to dinner, saying that the cook should bring it on the table immediately" (54). "Courteously" stresses her impeccable manners, and dinner is a reasonable excuse for her to use, considering her role in the household. Both choices show how careful Stowe is in word choice in order to depict Mrs. Shelby's wisdom without violating the domestic image. After dinner, Mrs. Shelby utilizes her feminine power even more:

[t]he more hopelessly sordid and insensible he appeared, the greater became Mrs. Shelby's dread of his succeeding in recapturing Eliza and her child, and of course the greater the motive for detaining him by every female artifice. She therefore graciously smiled, assented, chatted familiarly, and did all she could to make time pass imperceptibly. (61)

Here, Stowe explicitly notes Mrs. Shelby is using "every female artifice," which suggests female artifices are useful and powerful. In this scene, Mrs. Shelby is both dutiful and domestic because she attends Mr. Haley in all possible ways with her cordial and gracious manners, and she does it so well that time passes "imperceptibly." These depictions of Mrs. Shelby reflect Stowe's attitude toward the role of women: they are indisputably different from men but can be as powerful in unexpected and imperceptible ways.

If the expression "in the kitchen" only shows the domesticity of women, then "motherly love" clearly brings out higher and more noble characteristics of feminine spirit. In her critique, Tompkins says,

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself: the story of salvation through motherly love. Out of the ideological materials they had at their

disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture. (Tompkins 557)

This motherly love Tompkins talks about is reflected upon Mrs. Shelby's answer to her husband's accusation. When Mr. Shelby only worries about his honor and accuses Mrs. Shelby for "feeling too much," she contends, "[a]m I not a woman, — a mother? Are we not both responsible to God for this poor girl? My God! Lay not this sin to our charge... There's an awful feeling of guilt about it... I can't reason it away" (Stowe 76). Intertwined with her Christian belief is the motherly love she shares with Eliza. On the one hand, Eliza has become a daughter figure for her; on the other hand, Mrs. Shelby pities the fate of this "poor girl" and sympathizes with the pain and fear of losing her baby. After all, she is a mother and a woman as well. With traditional gender traits such as piety, domesticity, and motherly love, Mrs. Shelby is able to live up to the ideal female figure of the nineteenth century; and reciprocally, these gender traits enable her bold performances.

While Mrs. Shelby acts out of her concern for Eliza and in a more discreet way, Mrs. Bird, an even more archetypal representation of the nineteenth century female figure, acts according to her conscience and religious belief. When Mrs. Bird first appears in the book, Stowe introduces her as the model of the perfect wife, featured with all feminine traits. First of all, the description of her appearance leaves us the impression of a frail, timid woman:

Mrs. Bird was a timid, blushing little woman of about four feet in height, and with mild blue eyes, and a peach-blow complexion, and the gentlest, sweetest voice in the world; --as for courage, a moderate-sized cock-turkey had been known to put her to rout at the very first gobble, and a stout house-dog, of moderate capacity would bring her into subjection merely by a show of his teeth. (81-82)

Stowe carefully chooses "timid," "blushing," "little," "mild," "gentlest," and "sweetest" to describe Mrs. Bird's delicacy and further advances her point with an example which illustrates Mrs. Bird's fragility. Then, to make her the archetype of all wives, Stowe adds, "her husband and children were her entire world, and in these she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument" (82). "Entire world" and "entreaty and persuasion" prove Mrs. Bird's submissiveness, which is articulated again when Mr. Bird

decides to save Eliza. Mrs. Bird sits “prudently” and “quietly,” unwilling to meddle with the thoughts of her “liege lord” (88). “Liege lord” coheres with the fact that her husband (and children) are her entire world. Moreover, in the scene where Senator Bird comes home, we are informed with how well Mrs. Bird performs her wifely duty around the house: “[a] pair of new handsome slippers which his wife had been working for him” are prepared; “Mrs. Bird, looking the very picture of delight, was superintending the arrangements of the table, ever and anon mingling admonitory remarks to a number of frolicsome juveniles” (80). The “handsome slippers,” “arrangements of the table,” and “admonitory remarks to frolicsome juveniles” generate the image of a loving, motherly figure, which resembles Mrs. Bird’s domesticity. In general, she embodies the ideology of the role of women which all wives of that era ought to imitate and pursue.

Yet, Stowe surprises the readers with the power of piety that lives within this delicate, susceptible women figure. Mrs. Bird brings up the *Fugitive Slave Act* and heartily reproaches the enactment of such law asking “is it true that they have been passing a law forbidding people to give meat and drink to those poor colored folks that come along?...I didn’t think any Christian legislature would pass it...I think this is something downright cruel and unchristian” (81). Mrs. Bird’s faith in Christian values gives her the strength to criticize this immoral, inhumane law. The word “think” is used twice, which suggests that she is a woman with a free mind and is capable of doing some thinking on her own. As Tompkins says in her critique, “the choice is between the action that spring from ‘the sophistries of worldly policy’ and those inspired by ‘the sympathy of Christ.’ Reality... can only be changed by conversion in the spirit because it is the spirit alone that is finally real” (Tompkins 564). Stowe thinks that Mrs. Bird’s viewpoint on slavery is the kind that is inspired by the value of Christianity, and it gives her power instead of unconditional submissiveness to masculinity.

While holding righteous indignation toward the enactment of the law, Mrs. Bird is empowered by her pious, religious belief toward God and is determined to defy such a shameful, abominable law. She “rose quickly, with very red cheeks, which quite improved her general appearance, and walked up to her husband, with quite a resolute air, and said, in a determined tone ‘...I’ll break it the first time I get a chance, and I hope I shall have a chance, I do!’” (Stowe 82). “Rose” and “walked up” are forceful movements; the “red cheeks,” “resolute air,” and the “determined tone” reveal the strong wave of

emotions. Through these descriptions, Stowe succeeds in illustrating that even the smallest, most-frail woman is capable of exerting power so strong that it changes their generally meek appearance.

Stowe then continues to make the point that men are not at all superior to women in terms of intelligence. Mr. Bird is aware that “in this argument... his wife was making an assault on rather an indefensible point” (83). This acknowledgement is followed by Mrs. Bird’s “seeing the defenseless condition of the enemy’s territory... push[ing] her advantage” (83). The words “assault,” “defenseless,” “enemy,” and “push” make this scene a battlefield. They increase the tension between Mr. and Mrs. Bird and make her character more active and dynamic, which, again, suggests the force and power women are capable of. In fact, with Mrs. Bird’s logical, eloquent reasoning, Mr. Bird is rendered speechless and is forced to remain silent. As such, Dawn Coleman explains in “The Unsentimental Woman Preacher of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” that this novel “roundly critiques and silences male preachers and liberally puts sermons in the mouths of numerous humble characters” (Coleman 618). Women are the humble characters Coleman refers to, and, as a result of Mrs. Bird’s preaching, when Eliza shows up asking for help, Mr. Bird voluntarily suggests his wife gives Eliza some clothes and decides to drive the carriage by himself, all of which is the result of female preaching power.

Some feminists today may suggest that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is sexist, as all the white female characters are featured with traditional gender norms, living under the rule of their husbands. Some may even draw on the tragedy of Augustine and Marie St. Clare’s marriage to prove their point. After all, it is a fact that both of them defy their gender roles and thus have failed marriages. Augustine’s femininity and sensitivity, paired with Marie’s selfishness and cruelty, deviate much too far from the ideology of both genders; these characteristics they carry contribute to their tragic marriages one way or another. While I can see the reasons behind such assertion, I respectfully disagree. Despite the conformity to expected gender roles, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not male-chauvinist/sexist on account of its lovely, bold, kind-hearted female characters: they acquire power from feminine virtues and actively live their life — to move the world forward, to rewrite the history of mankind.

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