The Mother’s Influence and the Man’s Power in 
Uncle Tom’s Cabin

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In this essay I show how Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* attempts to create a change in heart of her individual reader to become abolitionists, as opposed to trying to call them to a mass uprising. I argue that through characters like George Shelby and Augustine St. Claire, Stowe shows her readers exactly how mother figures possessed the ability to influence men in power, and how they should use that influence to persuade those powerful men to have a positive change in their hearts toward slavery. After all, the men were the ones with the political power to abolish slavery. Therefore, I explore how Stowe also empowers her largely female readership through the creation of mother figures who influence their powerful sons to act against slavery.

It is rather evident, and well known, that Harriet Beecher Stowe was targeting her white, female reader when she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While it is important to realize the weight of this decision, I believe that in the conversation surrounding the novel more focus could be put on the men and their interactions with the women. Stowe, no doubt, understood even as she wrote to her female audience, that they would not have the power in their government or society to abolish slavery. Men were the ones who owned the plantations and ran the government, not women. Therefore, it is a wonder that Stowe did not attempt to appeal to more of a male audience, since they were the ones that had the power in government and made the laws. However, after reading through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the second time I realized that Stowe’s intent does not seem to be an overtly violent uprising against traditional society roles. Instead her goal seems to be to create a change in the heart of her individual readers. Stowe, knowing that the general novel-reading populous was white women, employed a tactic that would surely have a greater effect than the language of politics and war: sympathy.

Of course, the use of sympathy still does not explain the reason for Stowe targeting a primarily female audience. I believe that Stowe saw an idealized structure of the home, and in this structure she understood that while the men are the ones out making laws, they still had wives and mothers that shaped, or were currently shaping, their thoughts, ideas, and lives. The idea that the women held this type of influence over the men is reflected in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the interaction of the men with these women is absolutely crucial to understand, particularly the interaction between a powerful man and the mother figure. There are many essays that discuss the woman and mother within the context of the novel, however, there is little to no discussion of the men and how their lives are affected by these women. While there are few men in the novel who are even anti-slavery characters, the few who are had been influenced by their mothers/mother figures. I argue that through characters like George Shelby and Augustine St. Claire, Stowe shows her readers exactly how mother figures possessed the ability to influence men in power, and how they should use that influence to persuade those powerful men to
have a positive change in heart toward slavery.

To begin, I must first explain how I define power and influence for the sake of this analysis. Power, as I am referring to it in this essay, is the ability to make decisions, evoke action, or take action on one’s own life or another’s. An example that fits in with my topic is as follows: a man in Stowe’s time had power because he had control over his life, his wife, his children, and his slaves. In addition, he had the opportunity to institute or vote for a law that controlled, or made decisions that dictated the course of the life of another. Influence, as I will consider it, is the ability to persuade or have an effect on someone. The best example of this, as I will discuss shortly, is how many of the women in this novel effect the decisions of the men in their lives. While there are many female characters who are influential because of the sympathy or fear other characters have of them, for instance, Cassy, Eva, and Eliza, the important female characters are the ones who are influential because of their ability to say what the men need to hear to be evoked to action from them against slavery. There are few men in this novel who become abolitionist in their leanings, but it is interesting and important to note that those who do, are influenced by a mother or mother figure.

Stowe’s primary use of the sympathy tactic is the appeal to the mother. Elizabeth Ammons points out why Stowe was so compelled to write this anti-slavery novel that relied so heavily on the mother figure: “the mission to write what became America’s best known novel, and the mission fell to her, she believed, because she was a mother” (161). In addition to her feeling that the “mission” fell to her, Stowe felt sympathy for the slaves she saw: “My heart was bursting with the anguish excited by the cruelty and injustice our nation was showing to the slave, and praying God would let me do a little and to cause my cry for them to be heard” (qtd. in Ammons 161). Readers see Stowe give many of her female characters, but especially her mother figures, the same heart that was “bursting with the anguish” that her heart was when they witnessed the “injustice” of slavery. James Baldwin, in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” lashes out at Stowe for her use of sentimentality in the novel, saying: “she was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer; her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong” (Baldwin 533). While Stowe’s novel does have all the trappings of the work of an “impassioned pamphleteer” because of her admittedly heavy-handed attempts to evoke sympathy, I must disagree with Baldwin on his point that her novel “was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong.” Indeed, she was attempting to make the point that slavery was wrong, but in addition she was, I believe, trying to show her readers what they could do about it. As I have already mentioned, Stowe was not attempting to instigate a violent uprising against the institution of slavery, or write a novel that advocates for drastic societal upheaval, but a change of heart in her individual reader, therefore, she created the sympathetic and influential mother.

Of course, all the sympathetic mother figures in this novel would be useless if they did not serve a purpose. For Stowe, the mother figures in her novel are meant to both evoke sympathy from her female reader by giving them likable characters to relate to, and show them how women are capable of influencing men. Ammons explains that seeing the way Stowe portrays the mothers is important to understanding how she hoped to affect her readers: “[Stowe] characterizes the mothers as ‘the real saviors of society’” (Ammons 163). By making the “mothers” the “real saviors of society” in her novel Stowe gives her target audience not only a concept to relate to but a goal to strive for. While the heartbroken mothers evoke sympathy and cause readers to despise the effects of slavery on these women, the
mothers being portrayed as the “saviors” empowers the female audience to believe that they can make a difference in society. Ammons goes on to say: “Stowe’s treatment of maternal values may at a glance look unremarkable. Nearly every page of Uncle Tom’s Cabin hymns the virtues of Mother, whose revered figure whose benign influence over domestic life in the nineteenth century” (163). Stowe’s mothers are certainly given a great deal of influential power over the “domestic life” in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and with this power of influence they defy, condemn, or act against slavery. Stowe, no doubt, was trying to convince her female readers that they had the ability to influence the men, and her mother figures are meant to be the models of what an anti-slavery, influential woman looked like and was able to do.

One of the most memorable influential mother figures readers meet is Mrs. Bird. When Eliza arrives on the doorstep of Senator Bird’s home, it is Mrs. Bird who convinces him to have sympathy for the runaway, slave mother: “‘And what is the law? It don’t forbid us to shelter these poor creatures a night, does it, and given ‘em something comfortable to eat and a few old clothes and send them quietly about their business?’” (Stowe 71). Mrs. Bird’s challenge to her husband’s remark to follow the law is followed by a description of the woman: “Her husband and children were her entire world, and in these she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument. There was only one thing that was capable of arousing her, and that provocation came in on the side of her unusually gentle and sympathetic side” (72). Within the course of a few paragraphs Stowe, rather heavy handedly, shows her readers an influential woman, with the means to make a difference, and then tells her readers what they must do/be in order to gain that sort of influence over the men they are close to. The three particulars of this certain passage are the qualities of “persuasion,” “gentle[ness],” and a “sympathetic” nature. In addition, it is important to note that the primary concern of this woman is convincing her husband not so much to change the law, but to see that it is a law that, “no Christian legislature would pass” (71). Mrs. Bird also tries to get her husband, and in turn Stowe’s readers, to consider if it is “‘right and Christian’” (72), for him on an individual level, to do such a thing as turn away a needy woman. Stowe’s heavy use of Christianity and the concepts of being a “good Christian” mother that converts others to Christianity, arguably the only kind that Stowe believes could abolish slavery, is on nearly every page.

These mother figures who are persuasive, gentle, sympathetic, and who invoke their religion in order to influence their husbands are ideal anti-slavery women in Stowe’s mind. Therefore, it can be assumed that the concept Stowe wants her female readers to grasp is that it takes those “gentle,” “right and Christian,” “sympathetic” mother figures to influence a man to action against slavery. Jane Tompkins supports this idea in her essay, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Literary History”:

By resting her case, absolutely, on the saving power of Christian love and on the sanctity of motherhood and the family, Stowe relocates the center of power in American life, placing it not in the government, nor in the courts of law, nor in the marketplace, but in the kitchen. (560) Tompkins’ argument uses the language of “power” in relation to the “sanctity of motherhood,” and while I am arguing that the women in this novel only possess the ability of influence, I do not disagree with Tompkins on the idea that Stowe “relocates the center of power” to the women and/or mothers. However, this power is only through the “saving power of Christian love” and the “sanctity of motherhood,” therefore, the element of female influence is still intact. The “power” of the woman is in her ability to influence the man, not in whatever “power”
she can demand or take as the men in society do. With the assertion of the woman’s power through influence, I will now go on to describe two of the most important mother figures in the novel, Mrs. St. Clare and Mrs. Shelby. Their importance is in their influential positions and interactions with the only two powerful, anti-slavery men in the novel: Augustine St. Clare and George Shelby.

As already mentioned, there are many men in the novel who make decisions that decide the fate of another’s life, or possess the power to make such decisions, yet there are fewer of them that seem to advocate for positive changes in the lives of slaves as many female characters do. Because these men in the novel are meant to reflect those in society that, Stowe believes, are not making the right decisions, she gives them mother figures who are able to influence them to act against slavery. While Mrs. Bird is easily one of the most memorable mothers in the novel and, no doubt, the idealized woman and mother figure, her ability to influence her senator husband to act against the slave laws is not the only example of a mother influencing the powerful man. Of course, one may note that Mrs. Bird, while a mother, is not enacting her influence over a son, but a husband. While this fact is true, it is important to notice that she is still idealized and portrayed as a mother figure, and her motherly ties to her influence are what Stowe wishes her reader to focus on. However, there are two mother figures whose influence guides their powerful sons to see the evils in slavery. St. Clare and George Shelby (who I will refer to as just George at times) are the only two powerful, white men who seem to see the issues and evils of slavery and, at least mentally, resolve to do something about it.

When introduced to Augustine St. Clare, readers are shown his flippant and carefree lifestyle, marked by the absence of a maternal figure in his life: “St. Clare was good natured and self-indulgent, and sought to buy off with presents and flatteries” (Stowe 141). St. Clare has little motherly, female influence in his life, since the only females in his home are his young daughter, a few female slaves, and his wife (who is void of nearly every motherly instinct). However, once his cousin Ophelia begins living with them, she takes on the mother figure role. James Baldwin says: “Miss Ophelia, as we may suppose, was speaking for the author; her exclamation is the moral” (Baldwin 532). It is Ophelia’s presence that causes St. Clare’s thus far impartial views on slavery to be challenged, and his opinions formed and vocalized. If Ophelia is “speaking for the author,” Stowe, then readers can assume that she is meant to be the acting mother figure since Marie St. Clare does not fulfill that role in the slightest. Ophelia’s blunt opinions but sometimes contradictory actions cause St. Clare to call her out from time to time, which in turn leads to a discussion of his views. Readers are privy to a long conversation concerning slavery between the two of them when they find that the slave woman Prue had been whipped to death. After being accused by his cousin of “defending the system,” St. Clare sharply replies: “Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don’t think is right? Don’t you, or didn’t you ever, do anything that you did not think quite right?” (Stowe 202). From this passage readers immediately understand that St. Clare knows that slavery is not “quite right,” but for a while it seems that St. Clare will go down the path of Mr. Shelby the elder: being aware that slavery is not right, but participating in it anyway. St. Clare’s original belief was that there was no point in changing his ways, or advocating for abolition, because he believed slavery to be too messy, and one man was not enough to make a difference in the nation: “‘One man can do nothing, against the whole action of a community . . . or there must be enough agreed to make a current’” (248). St. Clare holds to his opinion that “one man can do
nothing” to change the course of slavery until right before his death.

At this point some may be beginning to question how I intend to explain the mother’s influence on St. Clare. While Ophelia does pose as a mother figure who possesses influence, it is St. Clare’s late mother, or a memory of her rather, that truly sparks St. Clare to desire a change. Readers do not know much about St. Clare’s mother until a parlor scene with him, Ophelia, and Tom. St. Clare, as he plays the piano, speaks of her singing: “‘There,’ . . . ‘this was one of my mother’s books. . . . ‘It was something she used to sing often,’ said St. Clare. ‘I think I can hear her now’” (Stowe 285). As St. Clare slips into singing the song himself, readers get Tom’s perspective and see how emotional St. Clare becomes: “St. Clare threw a deep and pulling expression into the words” (285). St. Clare’s “expression” does not end there as he strikes up a conversation with Ophelia concerning Judgment day; he comments on how he should fear, and then he mourns again for little Eva and her efforts to save him. Between the efforts of little Eva and the memory of his mother, St. Clare becomes: “St. Clare has truly convinced, or influenced rather, to use his power to do something he sees as right: rebel against the institution of slavery. He says: “‘My duty, I hope, to the poor and lowly, as fast as I find it out,’ . . . ‘beginning with my own servants, for whom I have yet done nothing; and perhaps, at some future day, it may appear that I can do something for a whole class’” (287). After reconnecting to his mother through the song, St. Clare is influenced to listen to his daughter’s and cousin’s pleading and change his views on, and position in, the institution of slavery. He now, at this point before his death, believes the idea that an individual can make a difference, just as Stowe was attempting to get her readers to believe, and, just as importantly, he now believes this because of the influence of his mother. Readers can know that it was indeed St. Clare’s mother that had influenced him to act as he does toward slavery because he reconnected with her in a way he had not been the entire novel when he resolves to free his slaves. He tells Tom and Ophelia: “‘I don’t know what makes me think of my mother so much, tonight,’ he said. ‘I have a strange kind of feeling, as if she were near me. I keep thinking of things she used to say’” (288). His last word is even of her: “he opened his eyes, with a sudden light, as of joy and recognition, and said ‘Mother!’ and then he was gone” (291). While St. Clare is unable to actually use his power to act on his mother’s influence, the idea that it was still the mother figure that caused him to finally change his views on slavery is the primary concern of Stowe’s. In a way, Stowe does fulfill St. Clare’s use of power in her creation of a sort of mini-St. Clare in George Shelby.

There are many similar characteristics between St. Clare and George Shelby and readers can see George Shelby is a future St. Clare. George Shelby is the only powerful man in the novel who sees the evils of slavery and is able to act against it. Dorothy Brown says that: “George Shelby . . . resolves to free all his slaves. He keeps his resolution” (Brown 1334). Readers know that before he was unexpectedly killed, St. Clare had resolved to free all his slaves: “‘beginning with my own slaves. . . I can do something for a whole class’” (Stowe 287). However, even though St. Clare is unable to fulfill his resolve, George Shelby is. Of course, it is important to note that George Shelby was likely influenced to do so by his mother. As a child readers see that George has sympathy, as his mother does, for the slaves: “I declare, its real mean! Don’t care what they say, any of ’em! It’s a nasty, mean shame! If I was a man, they shouldn’t do it” (90). Even at a young age, George’s ideas are more progressive than many of the men around him. We see that George holds to his declaration that, “If [he] was a man, they shouldn’t do it,” when he arrives at Simon Legree’s plantation to take Tom home. While
readers are never explicitly told or shown Mrs. Shelby’s influence on George, textual evidence suggests that he maintained a closer relationship with his mother than his father, therefore, as Stowe is attempting to convince her readers, George was influenced by his mother’s sympathy and views on slavery and as a powerful grown man he acts on them.

Readers see Tom, as he lay dying, advise George Shelby to stay close with his mother, again reminding readers of a mother’s importance in her son’s life. It is obvious that Stowe is attempting to use every chance she gets to present her readers with the idea that the mother/mother figures influence is crucial and useful to the abolition of slavery: “Al’ays keep close to yer mother. Don’t be getting’ into any of them foolish ways boys has of getting’ too big to mind their mothers. . . the Lord gives good many things twice over; but he don’t give ye a mother but once. Ye’ll never see sich another woman” (91). These “foolish ways” implicitly include growing into powerful men who do not listen to their mothers. Of course, because Stowe is attempting to convince women the motherly influence is important, she must also convince her male readers that they will “never see sich another woman” as their mothers which, in turn, is meant to make them more susceptible to their influence.

Indeed, George Shelby, just like St. Clare, certainly seems to be moved to act against slavery because of his mother’s influence. Before George goes to Legree’s plantation to get Tom back, readers are told that he and his mother are working together to set Mr. Shelby’s estate back in order: “she [Mrs. Shelby] and George were for some time occupied with collecting and examining accounts, selling property and settling debt” (379). Based on this passage we can assume that George has heeded Tom’s advice and kept “close to [his] mother.” After Tom’s death, George is moved to act on the sympathetic emotions instilled in him by his mother: “‘I will do what one man can to drive out this curse of slavery from my land!’” (383). Again, we hear sentiments of St. Clare concerning what “one man can” do to stop slavery. However, unlike St. Clare, George Shelby is more receptive to the idea of an individual doing what he can to “drive slavery from” the land. We know of Mrs. Shelby’s influence on George’s use of his power as a man because Stowe describes him at times with the gentle, motherly qualities that Mrs. Shelby possessed. For instance, George shows more sympathy than any man in the novel when he gives the news of Tom’s death to Chloë: “‘O, poor Aunt Chloë!’ said George, stopping compassionately, and taking her . . . hand between both his” (398 emphasis added). The compassionate sympathies are important because, as Cynthia Wolff points out in her essay: “a formulaic image of ruthless, power-hungry, American manhood had developed . . . traits such as self-sacrifice and sensitivity to needs of others were anathema to this crude masculine stereotype. Such ‘virtues’ were deemed feminine” (Wolff 599). Since George’s “sensitivity” towards another’s needs, Chloë’s, would have been deemed “feminine,” it is evident that Mrs. Shelby had a great hand in influencing her son. For Stowe, this influence is precisely what is needed, and as critical readers we know this because of George’s use of his power to free his slaves.

While there are many other influential women in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, these mothers and mother figures who influence the powerful men are the ones who Stowe wants her readers to focus on. There are two purposes for this focus: the first is to create a change in heart in her individual reader, therefore, convincing them that “one man” has the power to do something about the issue of slavery. Second, she is attempting to show women that not only do the men have power to make individual choices to rectify the issue but they, as women and mothers, have the ability to influence those men in power to make those choices. Susan Ryan
says that: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin a revolutionary agenda that calls for both the emancipation of slaves and the cultural empowerment of women” (Ryan 595). Even if Stowe’s novel is best known as America’s great anti-slavery novel, I agree with Ryan that she also has the additional motive of the “cultural empowerment of women;” otherwise, I do not think Stowe’s mother figures would possess the ability to influence and create sympathy as they do. While many critics focus on the portrayal of slavery in the novel as the element that caused people to have a reaction, it cannot be ignored that Stowe’s tactic of the mother influencing the powerful man was still successful. Men may have been the ones to go to war over the issue of slavery, but who was it that, supposedly, caused these men to see a need to do so? The women, the mothers, in Stowe’s audience that showed them her novel and caused them to understand how unjust and unchristian the institution of slavery was. Of course, we must not forget who influenced these mothers; none other than the most influential mother of them all: Stowe, herself.

Works Cited


