

## 2019 Classical Literature Scholarship—Second Place

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### Hope in Motherhood

Before reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, motherhood seemed a dutiful eighteen year pause on one's individual potential. Raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, an advocate for the reverencing of family roles, I knew motherhood was important. However I did not yet understand the sacred stewardship entrusted to mothers, nor that the transcendent love a mother can hold could so artfully bridge society. By creating a vivid picture of virtuous motherhood, Stowe set a universally applicable standard of virtue.

The novel opens with a grim scene: an otherwise-good, but presently-indebted man negotiating the price of a trusted friend. When the trader demands a child to satisfy the remaining debts, the owner concedes. Just as one becomes outraged at the unchangeable systemic inhumanity, Stowe introduces a character who most definitely *will not* give in to reluctant acceptance of a fabricated fate-- the child's mother. Maternal commitment moves Eliza to divine courage as she flees to save her son's life. In heroic leaps across an icy river, it is evidenced that a mother's selfless love can transcend inhumane systems bound by self-interest.

Throughout the novel, Stowe presents a diverse collection of mothers: black, white, slave, free, aristocratic, abused, and politically involved; religious leaders, and bible-carrying influencers; adoptive, biological, young, old, hurt, and hopeful. She gives these women names, and powerful narratives, continually asking one to recognize the shared bond of motherhood.

In contesting the sale of Eliza's son, Mrs. Shelby counters "how can I bear to have this open acknowledgment that we care for not tie, not duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money? I have talked with Eliza bout her boy-- her duty to him as a Christian mother..."

(Stowe, 30), recognizing that mankind ultimately belongs to a higher power, and itself through inherent bond, not certificate of ownership. When Mr. Shelby accuses his wife of undue compassion, she exclaims, “Feel too much! Am not I a woman,-- a mother? Are we not both responsible to God for this poor girl?” (Stowe, 66), relating her own experience as a mother to that of a slave. Standing firm on this equalizing bond, she aids in Eliza’s escape.

This transcendent bond again manifests in Rachel Halliday: the ideal Quaker woman, strong in both home and community involvement. When preserving Eliza, she addresses her as “my daughter” (Stowe, 132), disrupting bloodlines and racial prejudice to include a runaway slave in her family. Following the example of Jesus Christ, she “demonstrates unfailing acceptance and care of all of God’s creatures” (Moore) regardless of legal consequence.

Virtuous motherhood, as proven by a greedy depiction of Marie St. Clare, is selfless. This is exemplified by Ruth, another Quaker woman who, in response to a remark that she “uses [herself] only to learn how to love [her] neighbor,” asks, “Isn’t it what we are made for? If I didn’t love John, and the baby, I should not know how to feel for her” (Stowe, 125). It’s interesting to note her biblical namesake: a woman who devoted herself to caring for another mother, being a Moabite widow born of incest, is often set as an example of God’s indiscriminate love. Ruth Stedman honors her name by displaying a selfless and indiscriminate devotion for the well-being of others.

Stowe’s universal call to eradicate slavery, and disparate stories showcasing this injustice, are woven together through the bond of motherhood, in spirit and plot. Women on ships, in plantation houses, and in log cabins, connect aristocrats, senators, and slave drivers; “hard and reprobate as the godless man seemed now, there had been a time when he had been rocked on the bosom of a mother...” (Stowe, 339).

Through small example, such as Mrs. Bird teaching her sons not to stone a defenseless kitten, and grand legacy left by Rachel Halliday's role in the underground railroad, I came to reverence the awesome strength of motherhood. Stowe taught me of the unity and peace that can come from this bond, at home, and among the human family; she taught me that motherhood looks different on all those who bear it, however all virtuous mothers bear the same commitment to selfless love.

Nearing the conclusion of the book, Uncle Tom, the patriarchal embodiment of virtue, dies, at the hands of a slavedriver, in a dusty cabin. The injustice is stifling, yet hope is not lost, as Cassy, like many other mothers, pushes onward to prevail, reminding all that as long as virtuous mothers remain, the possibility of a virtuous society endures.