REPRESENTING THE PLANTATION MISTRESS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THE SOUTHERN PLANTATION MISTRESS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

> She was the South's Palladium, this Southern woman—the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in the face of the foe. At last, I verily believe, the ranks of the confederacy went rolling into battle in the misty conviction that it was wholly for her that they fought. (Cash 86)

Born in patriarchy and nurtured by slavery, the southern lady was the imaginative construct of white, slaveholding men, who looked to her to rationalize their peculiar race and gender systems. Pious and passive, submissive and loyal, the southern lady served as an exemplar of morality and devotion. Modest, graceful, and obedient, she focused on pleasing her husband and managing his household. As the picture of innocence, she was supposed to take no interest in intellectual pursuits. She was, in short, "her culture's idea of social, moral, racial, religious and sexual perfections" (Boyd 12).

Many of these characteristics and ideas have been and continue to be essential to the myth of the southern lady. In antebellum American culture, the southern lady maintained an elusive and yet powerful presence. She became the idealized female figure

belonging to a specific race and class, namely white middle to upper class Southerners. It is among her own race and class that the myth of the southern lady first originated, serving as a manifestation of the cultural attitudes of the South as well as a guide to how upper class women were to behave and present themselves in the domestic and social sphere. She was, of course, more mythological than real.

The dominant nineteenth-century ideology concerning women was "the cult of true womanhood." It advocated the four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness (Welter 152).[1] "Put them all together," observes Barbara Welter, "and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman" (152). More importantly, the cult of womanhood set a number of social expectations for women in antebellum America and served as a guide to how upper class women were to behave. Women were supposed to be refined and virtuous, benevolent and kind to their families and slaves.

The cult of true womanhood reinforced this ideal representation of southern white women. The image of the plantation mistress that emerged from this ideology did not accurately reflect the realities of many white women's lives in antebellum America. Instead, it promoted the figure of the southern belle which impacted the way historians and literary scholars of the nineteenth-century defined womanhood and southern women in general. In fact, as Marli F. Weiner points out "The ideal nineteenth-century white woman was therefore defined as a devoted mother, loving wife, and guardian of moral

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[1] Barbara Welter traces the emergence of the "cult of true womanhood" in her groundbreaking article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860". She argues that according to society piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity were the four cardinal virtues that defined the "true" woman (152). Women in the North and the South were expected to conform to the "cult of domesticity" which stressed the importance of women as mothers and exemplars of virtue and morality.

virtue. She was to be submissive to her husband, pious and pure, an example of virtue to her children, and a soother of her husband's cares" (53). Certain public expectations shaped the way her society, and later on twentieth-century historians, viewed the plantation mistress and her place in the slave community which is not necessarily the way southern white women, or their slaves for that matter, viewed themselves.

The myth of the southern lady and the cult of true womanhood ultimately influenced the historical or literary representation of the southern woman. The image of the southern white plantation mistress has long been plagued with stereotypes which misrepresent these women and distort their true value and importance in antebellum history. Up until the past three decades, there was limited research into the representation of the plantation mistress in history and literature. Historians in general abandoned the plantation mistress and focused entirely and solely on the relations between the slaves and the slave owners. Writers such as John Blassingame, Stanley Elkins and Eugene Genovese[2] studied exclusively the society of the plantation masters and their place in the southern slave culture and community. They completely overlooked the presence of the plantation mistress and denied the important role that she played in antebellum American society.

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[2] John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, and Stanley M. Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* all discuss how slavery as an institution shaped the lives of both slaves and slave owners. However, none of the authors devotes any attention to the presence of the slave mistress in the plantation household. They did not recognize the important role of the plantation mistress in southern American culture.

This study focuses on examining the portrayal of the plantation mistress in southern women's diaries, slave narratives and abolitionist documents. Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacob's slave narratives along with Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mary Chesnut's diary and Mattie Griffith pseudo autobiography allow me to explore how nineteenth-century literary conventions and societal expectation affect the portrayal of the plantation mistress. Many questions can be raised regarding the presence of the plantation mistress in antebellum literature: How do personal experience and political and social agendas play together to shape Douglass's and Jacobs's depiction of their slave mistresses? What does Mary Chesnut's diary add to the understanding of southern slaveowners' wives? How does her private writing modify the portrayal of the southern women from the perspective of a southern elite white woman? Is there a difference between how white women of the North and the South identify the plantation mistress? How do ex-slaves perceive her? Do different literary forms – diaries, narratives, and fiction – shape or alter the way different authors understand and interpret the image of the white plantation women of the South? How much of the portrayal of southern belles is shaped by anecdote and fantasy? Why do most of these authors play with and emphasize certain features of the plantation mistress – jealousy, hypocrisy – while overlooking other characteristics of the southern lady?

Not all of these questions, however, can be answered in a single scholarly work. This study is an attempt to examine how the portraits of antebellum slave mistresses constructed by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass (both former slaves) differ from Mary Chesnut's, Harriet Beecher Stowe's and Mattie Griffith's understanding of the southern elite plantation women. It explores how first hand experience, social

expectations, literary conventions, and artistic purposes come together in their writing and influence the way writers construct the image of the plantation mistress. How do writers of different races, social classes and places define the plantation mistress in their writing? What kind of relationship exists between the abolitionist purpose of both Douglass's and Jacob's narratives and the way they recount their experience under slavery? How much do they say and how much they leave out? What is the difference between the account of slavery written by the slave woman and that written by the plantation mistress? How do northern elite women address the image of the southern women? How much do their political affiliations (mainly with the abolitionist movement) play a part in their representation of the institution of slavery and the plantation mistress? Ultimately, the study seeks to examine how white southern mistresses are compromised as they cannot enact the ideals of true womanhood imposed by society.

In the past twenty years several scholars have tried to properly place the elite southern white women in the context of slavery and the plantation house. Anne Firor Scott was among the first to devote attention to the importance of the plantation mistress in her study *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970). She presented a considerably different image of southern white women—women who were no longer content with their submissive role and who went beyond being the perfect southern belles. The book disclosed the existence of a remarkable difference between the myth and the reality of a white woman's life in the antebellum south. Scott discusses how gender relations play a significant part in the plantation household, a theory that Blassingame and Elkin did not explore earlier in their studies.

However, it was Catherine Clinton's groundbreaking work, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (1982), that gave the plantation mistress the attention and recognition she deserves. Clinton's book provided the long necessary groundwork for southern antebellum women's study and questioned some of the prevailing notions regarding the plantation mistresses and their lives. The book addresses the myths surrounding the "cult of domesticity" and explores the various role southern white women had in antebellum America. Clinton describes how the ultimate success of a plantation household depended on the supervisory abilities of the mistress. The plantation mistress was responsible for most of the domestic tasks as well as for the care and feeding on both the white and black inhabitants of the plantation.

The greatest contribution of Clinton's work lies perhaps in her depiction of the southern society's expectations of white women. The plantation mistresses had to be refined and virtuous in order to reflect the public perception of their class and social position. Clinton goes even further to suggest that "the image of the southern lady was more a product of fable than fact, but her real incarnation had a more vital impact on antebellum life than her legend" (xiv-xv). Sheexplains that "the southern lady was a symbol of gentility and refinement for plantation culture…even though the practical needs of plantation life cast her in quite a different role. The clash of myth and reality was monumental" (17).

In *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese elaborates on the social and domestic role of the elite southern white women. Like Clinton, she explores the less than glamorous reality of the plantation's mistress life and provides an insight into the role that elite white women

played in the South and the slavery as an institution. Fox-Genovese acknowledges the fact that most white plantation mistresses enjoyed the privileges that slavery provided them with and sometimes they tended to overlook its abuses. The plantation mistresses' attitude towards slavery is complicated by the fact that some of them realized the evils of slavery but did not rebel against it. By accepting the institutions of slavery as a part of southern society, women became supporters of the enslavement and degradation of blacks.

Fox-Genovese was one of the scholars who pioneered the study of the relationship between female slaves and their mistresses. Her book has shaped the historical discussion of women and slavery in the American South. It provides an invaluable source for understanding the lives of both slaves and mistresses trapped in the public view. Fox-Genovese examines the questions of the identity and the proper place of slaves and mistresses in the Big House. She challenges many views on slavery and Southern white women's participation in it and argues that a clear understanding of the black and white women of the antebellum south cannot be achieved without consideration of the historical and social settings that defined and shaped their lives. Black and white women cannot be seen outside of the context of the slavery system since their lives were affected by it. Notions of intimacy and authority determine the fate of the relationships that existed between the slaves and the masters as well as between the masters and the plantation mistresses.

Fox-Genovese argues that no matter how close and how "true" their relationship seemed, the mistress/ female slave relationship did not always constitute a true affection because it was based on the institution of slavery. Social class rather than gender shaped

how white and black women viewed themselves and each other. There was a clear priority of class and racial struggles over gender struggles. Slave women did not necessarily share their mistresses' opinion about slavery and viewed them as oppressors rather than sisters. Common gender not only failed to bring together black and white women of the south, but differences of class and race maintained a distinctive gap in their experiences. Slaveholding women benefited from the institution of slavery and were not willing to give up their privileges, an argument already established earlier by Catherine Clinton. Some slave mistresses (such as Mary Boykin Chesnut) did realize the inhumanity of slavery and advocated its abolition.

Fox-Genovese bases her arguments on studies of primary sources such as journals, diaries, memoirs and private correspondence, as well as published works of plantation mistresses and slaves. However, she also acknowledges that not all narratives written by plantation mistresses represent an accurate expression of private thoughts or real experience and claims that many southern white women used journals to create an idealized self or reality which severely distorts the portrayal of both black and white women of the antebellum south. She also offers a new and interesting interpretation of the diary of Mary Boykin Chesnut and the narrative of Harriet Jacobs. She questions the true account and representation in both works, arguing that there are significant shifts in tone in Chesnut's revised journals. As for Harriet Jacobs, Fox-Genovese dismisses the possibility that a slave woman could have written such an eloquent account of her life given the fact that the majority of the slaves in the south were rather illiterate. Fox-Genovese's greatest contribution is her detailed account of the differences between north

and south white elite women, and she cites those differences to establish the economic and cultural atmosphere of the southern plantation household.

Recently, Marli Weiner's work *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830 – 1880* (1997) revisited the issues of race and gender ideologies on southern plantations. Weiner argues that black and white women in the plantation often worked closely together, which presented them with an opportunity to create bonds that went beyond race differences. She develops in detail the ideology of domesticity and explores how it changed the relationship between the mistresses and the slaves. The subtle difference between the northern and the southern ideologies of domesticity resulted in southern women being "particularly urged to turn their benevolent impulses in the direction of their slaves" and particularly female slaves (Weiner 69). Weiner points out the mutual dependence and shared experience of white and black women and the bond of womanhood that united them.

Weiner's work nearly contradicts Fox-Genovese in arguing that black and white women on the plantation were bound together by gender and the ideology of domesticity – quite a departure from what Fox-Genovese and Catherine Clinton had to say. She discusses how prevailing antebellum notions of gender affected the relationship and behavior of white and black women in the Big House. Slaves and mistresses were both subject to the power of white men and their laws. Weiner believes that domesticity and gender created a bond between black and white plantation women, a bond that was not severely affected by social class differences.

Weiner's work provides an original and challenging presentation of plantation women in the mid-nineteenth-century America. It also provides a detailed analysis of the

South's ideology of domesticity and its effect on the relationship between female slaves and their mistresses. Her book goes beyond merely discussing this relationship during the last decades of the antebellum south; instead, she tries to present how the Civil War changed that relationship. Weiner claims that many plantation mistresses treated their slaves well and "humanized an inhuman institution" (87). She also argues that many slave women came to appreciate the special care and attention that their mistresses offered them. Her central argument that the relationship between the southern plantation mistresses and their female slaves was generally harmonious and compassionate does not prove to be quite persuasive. Weiner barely addresses the physical punishment inflicted upon slaves by their mistresses, which makes her representation of the role and nature of the plantation mistress incomplete.

Recently, Drew Gilpin Faust sought to position the southern lady and her attitude towards her slaves and slavery in general in the history of the South. Her book *Mothers of Invention: Women in the Slaveholding South in the Antebellum Civil War* (1997) deals with the complicated relation that existed between the slaves and their mistresses. Like Weiner, Faust traces the development of this relation during and after the Civil War—a period that is scarcely examined by previous scholars. Before that Civil War, southern plantation women supervised and sometimes assisted in the domestic tasks. However, during the war, some of them had to actually perform these tasks themselves. Faust's book strips the plantation mistress from the stereotype of southern belle engaged solely in social activities. Rather, it focuses on the work that these southern elite women had to perform daily.

The works of Clinton, Fox-Genovese, Weiner and Faust contribute greatly to the history and scholarship of southern plantation mistresses. Dispelling stereotypes, they depict the complex lives of elite southern plantation women. They even go further to point out the mistresses' problematical attitudes towards slavery. Although many mistresses saw their slaves as a burden and often complained in their private correspondence that slaves were nothing but "tax and annoyance to their owners," many were also well aware of the sexual abuse and mistreatment of their slaves by the mistresses' fathers, brothers and husbands[3]. This sexual tension that existed in the southern plantation challenged the ideology of the southern ladies as guardians of moral virtue and tested their moral and ethical beliefs.

Scholars have used southern elite white women's diaries, journals and private correspondences as well as slave accounts in an attempt to establish the complex relation between slave mistresses and their slaves. However, with the exception of Fox-Genovese who briefly touches upon the literary and social convention when addressing the question of authorship and accurate representation in different forms of narratives, these scholars have not fully questioned the accuracy of the image of the plantation mistress as portrayed by white women and slaves. What is missing from the discussion is an exploration how the plantation mistress inevitably looks different depicted from various perspectives.

I begin my study with Lydia Maria Child's *An Appeal on Behalf of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, published in 1833, and her short story *Slavery's Pleasant*

[3] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old Sout*h. 335-369.

Homes because Child had a tremendous influence on the politics, literature, and culture of nineteenth-century America. As one of the prominent supporters of the abolitionist movement, Child presented the first full scale analysis of the political, economic, and social foundations of slavery. Her book, however, created a tremendous debate when it was first published, due to her argument that racial prejudice was worse in the North than in the slaveholding South. Her book retains interest as a historical document even today. Child's writing helps to convey the complexity of the historical moment: in her argument she uses private and public documentation of specific incidents and common practices, provisions of state laws, legislative debates, and quotations from pro- and anti-slavery speakers and writers. As a result, Child's *Appeal* represents a first step towards an understanding of the historical and social conditions in antebellum America.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or Life Among the Lowly was a bestseller when it first appeared in 1852. It generated a number of reviews, both favorable and unfavorable. Perceived by some as fiction and by others as a true depiction of slavery in the south, Stowe's book has a particular value of its own. Whether the accounts that Stowe gives in the book are based on real experience or not is less important than the fact that she portrays different types of slave owners and plantation households. More significantly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents a gallery of southern elite women—each one of them embodying a specific feature of the plantation mistress as viewed by a Northern white woman herself.

Slave narratives, on the other hand, allow me to address how the slave's point of view differs or not from that of the white women of both the North and the South. Of course when talking about slave narratives, one needs to consider the issues of

autobiography and authenticity. The authenticity of slave narratives, in particular, has been a debatable issue for a long time—ever since the first slave narratives appeared in the United States. Since the purpose of the slave narratives is to support the abolitionist movement and to reveal the truth about slavery for that particular cause, it is understandable why certain members of the national readership might question the authenticity of the narrator and its account. As a result, most slave narratives contain authenticating documents such as a preface or a letter written by a well-known and reputable person. Frederick Douglass' narrative exemplifies that pattern. On the other hand, Harriet Jacob's narrative did not receive proper recognition until Jean Fagan Yellin's work verified Jacobs as the unquestioned author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, this narrative questions the parameters of both fiction and autobiography to an extent that provoked John Blassingame to conclude that her story is not credible," a "fiction," "a story that is "too melodramatic" (373)[4]. Even the very title of the narrative suggests that not the whole truth will be revealed—*incidents* refer to particular moments from the life of the slave as opposed to an account of the complete life.

For the purpose of this study, I recognize that defining autobiography is a difficult task and acknowledge the fact that not all the information presented in Douglass's and Jacobs's writing can be verified. In this study I accept James Olney's definition of autobiography as "a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point of his life—the present—,looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show that past history has led to this present state of being" (Olney 47). I admit

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[4] John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South.* 373.

slave narratives to be more or less true accounts of personal experience written, however, for the abolitionist cause. I do not seek to argue that Jacobs and Douglass revealed the complete story of their lives and experiences under slavery. The very fact that Frederick Douglass expanded his 1845 narrative into his 1855 narrative *My Bondage, My Freedom* suggests that *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* does not represent the full account of his life. Nevertheless, I accept both Jacobs's and Douglass's narratives as written for a specific political cause, which affects what information they include and the way that information is presented in their writing.

Mattie Griffith's work further complicates the issue of the slave narratives. Assuming the disguise of a slave girl, she tells the story of the cruelty of slavery. Her pseudo-autobiography represents how a white abolitionist activist might image herself as a slave writing a slave narrative. But her book goes beyond bringing the question how true and accurate the slave narratives are and whether those narratives are actually written by the former slaves themselves or are simply fiction. Despite the fact that Griffith could not have possibly written her work from personal experience as a slave, the book represents an interesting narrative of how a former slave mistress herself perceived slavery and its effect on black women in the plantation South. More importantly, it also presents a portrayal of the elite southern women from the point of view of a southern woman herself.

While Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* are clearly fiction, the same cannot be said for Mary Boykin Chesnut's diary. Never published during her lifetime, her diary presents several challenges for literary scholars. Chesnut's surviving diary entries date from February to

December 1861 and January to June 1865 and trace her perception of herself and her society. Chesnut revised her diaries on two occasions a decade apart. During the process of revising in 1875-1876 and 1881-1885, Chesnut added nearly 400 pages, elaborated on other entries and possibly deleted some of the previously incorporated material. Many of those changes significantly transform the narrative conventions of the diary as a genre and introduce the possibility of fictionalization, and this brings into question the authenticity of Chesnut's writing. It is no longer the true account of her daily life on the plantation; rather, it is a work carefully planned and rewritten from a retrospective point of view. Her diaries, adapted for the purpose of publication, do not merely represent her most inner thoughts but a selection of what Chesnut would like to share with an audience. A further complication may be found in the fact that after her death the diaries became property of David R. Williams III, Chesnut's nephew who lived with her during the last years of her life (Woodward and Muhlenfeld xxvi). One can only speculate whether her family preserved the writing the way Chesnut left it, especially since Mary Chesnut was rather indiscreet and uncompromising in her writing, including both names of people and places involved in her life.

The works of Child, Jacobs, Douglass, Stowe, Griffith and Mary Chesnut address at some point or another the issue of slavery. More importantly, they also devote attention to the elite southern women of antebellum America. Written for different purposes and by authors from different racial and social backgrounds, their writings document both personal experience and social context in an attempt to reconstruct life under slavery. They also address the relationship between the slaves and the plantation mistresses, a relationship that can be both nurturing and devastating. Trapped between social

conventions and reality in the Big House of the plantation, mistresses were often both kind and cruel towards their slaves.

LYDIA MARIA CHILD AND HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: TWO NORTHERN WOMEN AND A GALLERY OF MISTRESSES

> The book that moved me most…was then beginning to move the whole world more than any other book has moved it. I read it as it came out week after week in the old *National Era* and I broke my heart over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as every one else did…I felt its greatness when I read it first, and as often as I have read it since, I have seen more and more clearly that it was a very great novel… still perhaps our chief fiction.
>
> William Dean Howells[5]

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared in serial form in the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era* in 1851-1852. The book quickly became a bestseller, selling more than 300,000 copies in the United States in its first year and a million in England. Stowe's novel explored the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse endured by slaves in the South. It described the horrors of family separation as well as incidents of betrayal and escape. More importantly, the book also offered glimpses into the life of the slave community, the love between family members and their trials at separation. It portrayed African-Americans as sympathetic, fascinating, and trustworthy characters. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was probably "the most influential novel ever written"

[5] William Dean Howells, *My Literary Passions*, Library Edition of The Writings of William Dean Howells (New York: Harper & Bros., 1895), p. 50.

and certainly the most effective political novel in American history (Donovan 11). According to the legend, when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Stowe in 1862 he credited Stowe with having started the Civil War.[6] The book, as Jane Tompkins remarks, offered "a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (124). In her attempt to present the slavery issue in all of its various forms and manifestations, Stowe covers a wide range of social life and sketches a gallery of characters—both white and black. Among the most fully developed and memorable characters in Stowe's work are the white women of the South. In her depiction of southern white women, Stowe built on the reigning nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity as well as on the words of ex-slaves and northern writers, especially Lydia Maria Child.

Lydia Maria Child's 1833 groundbreaking study of slavery and racial prejudice in antebellum south provided a valuable source for the abolitionist movement. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* is remarkable for its depth and comprehensive treatment of slavery and its history. Unlike the narrative of ex-slaves and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which rely on personal testimony and sentimental appeal, Child's *Appeal* deploys documented factual evidence to expose the corrupting effect of slavery on both the slaves and the masters. Child's work touched upon an issue that had rarely been represented before to the American readership—the actual cruelties resulting from slavery. The book not only portrays Africans as morally and intellectually capable

[6] Reportedly, Abraham Lincoln said to Harriet Jacobs "So, you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War!" In *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, Thomas F. Gossett established that no evidence exists to suggest that Lincoln had ever read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (314-315).

individuals deserving freedom, but also calls attention to the effects of slavery on the slave-owners and their wives. As Carolyn Karcher points out, “Child takes her analysis to a deeper level when she turns to the effect of slavery on the white mistress” (xxxvi). While others before her had commented on the depravity of slavery on both slaves and masters (Olaudah Equiano and David Walker for example), few have included a detailed discussion of how mistresses experienced slavery. In her *Appeal*, Child suggests that the slave mistress has become a “masculinized brute,” a “mere caricature of a ‘lady’” (Karcher xxxvi). She narrates instances of female cruelty that demonstrate the corrupting influence of slavery on white women in the South. Under the pervasive power of slavery, mistresses lose their ladylike manners and turn into evil monsters. Child asserts that while some “authentic records of female cruelty would seem perfectly incredible,” in reality, white women often engaged in violent acts towards their slaves, frequently under the influence of their husbands. The author describes in detail the treatment that Henry and Helen Moss bestowed upon their slave Kate. She explains how Kate was subjected to a flogging for seventeen days before being sent to work in the fields where she died shortly after (Child 24).

Because of their cruelty and indifference, Kate’s death can be seen as a murder. Not only were the slave master and his wife not found guilty of murder (just a mere misdemeanor which carried only five months’ imprisonment), but they also maintained their high standings in their own community. In fact, as Child suggests, “many of the most respectable people…petitioned for a mitigation of their punishment, visited them in prison, did everything to identify themselves with them, and on their liberation from jail, gave them a public dinner as a matter of triumph” (25).

Even more shocking, the southern community regarded Helen Moss as a person who "stood high for humanity among the neighboring planters" (Child 25). Although antebellum society expected and in fact demanded Helen to be a southern lady and adhere to the codes and standards of womanhood, she was respected and admired by her neighbors for her violent behavior towards her slave. Far from being submissive, physically weak, timid, modest and compassionate—the qualities that most often defined the southern lady—Helen Moss, nevertheless, remained a respected member of the community. In the eyes of her neighbors, she was guilty of no wrongdoing; after all, Kate was only a slave, a property. Using the story of Kate and her master and mistress, Child asserts her point that slavery degraded and dehumanized not only slaves but white people as well.

Significantly, Child focuses more on the story of a New England woman whose otherwise amiable and affectionate nature changed under the system of slavery, a theme later developed in Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Child and afterwards Douglass argue that even white women from the Free States who encounter slavery gradually become more and more accustomed to it until they fully accept the institution of slavery and the powers that come with it. When the woman from New England married a slave owner and moved into the South, she found that "the sight of slavery was at first exceedingly painful" (Child 27). Yet, several years later that same lady, once amiable, now is described as "fiend" (Child 27). She has become a slaveholder, just like Sophia Auld in Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Not only does the sight of slaves and the cruel treatment inflicted upon them no longer trouble her, but she herself, "with her own lady-like hands," applies the cow-skin on no other but her faithful

servant. As Child asserts, "slavery contaminates all that comes within its influence," even a northern white woman (29).

While Child gives more examples of southern women involved in violent outbursts towards their slaves, she also acknowledges that there are a number of mistresses who "are as kind to their slaves as they can be, consistently with keeping them in bondage" (28). Though such instances represent only a "stinted kindness," it is important to recognize this second category of slaveholding women—the ones that genuinely try to lessen the harshness of slavery by gestures of kindness and compassion. These mistresses, as Child shows in *Slavery's Pleasant Homes*, often are unaware of the evil of slavery before they marry a slaveholder. Thus, they are destined to experience a huge disappointment, a point that Harriet Jacobs makes years later. On their husbands' plantations, mistresses come to realize the conflict between moral obligation and everyday reality. In *Slavery's Pleasant Homes*, Child illustrates that even the kindest mistress finds it difficult to adhere to social standards when her pride is wounded because of her husband and his relations with female slaves. Marion, a wealthy planter's daughter and bride of Frederic Dalcho, is first introduced as a kindhearted, lovely and caring mistress who took special pride in the beauty of her slave who also happened to be her half-sister. Like Mrs. Shelby in Stowe's book, Marion regards her slave Rosa more as a human being than as a servant—she even tries to persuade her husband let Rosa marry one of his slaves.

However, even a kind mistress like Marion changes her temperament when faced with the betrayal of her husband. Unwilling to blame the master, his wife turns her rage onto the female slave. When Marion becomes aware of her husband's relations with her

slave, she hits Rosa for the first time. Quickly she realizes that Rosa is not to blame—slavery is what corrupts both. While the white woman feels morally violated, the black slave is physically violated. Both women are trapped into the evil of the system and neither can escape.

This idea is further developed in Child's story *The Quadroons*. Slavery ruins both Rosalie's and Charlotte's lives. Both women experience the corrupting effect of slavery. Edward leaves Rosalie, the quadroon, in order to marry Charlotte, hoping that the marriage will advance his political career. Although Rosalie is his first love, Edward has no future with her because of her mixed blood. Rosalie is as beautiful and as fair as any southern lady is, and yet "the edicts of society had built up a wall of separation between her and them; for she was a quadroon" (Child 116). In the eyes of society, Rosalie and Edward will never be officially married and cannot have a future together. Thus, under the pressure of southern slave-holding values, Edward betrays Rosalie and their child and marries a woman of pure white blood. Charlotte, the only daughter of a very popular and wealthy man, is unaware of "what a dreary lot would hers have been" (Child 127). The young bride's hope of a happy domestic life will be soon shattered into pieces once she comes to fully realize the extent of Edward and Rosalie's relationship. Unable to forget Rosalie and their daughter, Edward shows little love for his wife. At the end, both Rosalie and Charlotte endure the sinister consequence of slavery and racial prejudice.

Child's work was among the first to call attention to the image of the slave mistress. As such, her texts partially introduced the southern white women to the American audience. Because *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* is a non-fiction work and her short stories cover only one pattern of life under

slavery, her representation of the slave mistresses is not fully developed. Nevertheless, Child suggests several different characteristics of the plantation mistress that are further realized in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While Child cites stories as told by other people without including any form of dialogue, Stowe gives her characters a voice—a way for the reader to see the female characters not only through the narrator's eyes but also through the words of the women themselves. Stowe expands the two common types of southern women as outlined by Child (the kind mistress and the abusive mistress) and further transforms their image. In the view of Richard Davis, Child's white women are "remarkably varied because some of them act partly as mouthpieces for their creator and at the same time are genuine individuals, and simultaneously some of them represent the many facets of slavery and the Southern way of life as Mrs. Stowe saw them" (109). There is no one universal stereotype of the plantation mistress in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; rather, there is a gallery of southern women who exhibit specific characteristic features of the mistress already introduced by Child and Douglass.

Immediately after publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was both praised as a tremendous achievement and attacked as one sided and inaccurate story. Abolitionists admired the book for its compassionate portrayal of African-Americans while Southerners claimed that Stowe has fabricated an unrealistic picture of slavery. Many criticized the author because she never had slaves or had lived in the South. In fact, she never even visited the South. The years before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was in Cincinnati that she first became aware of the horrors of slavery. Moreover, in 1833 Stowe went on a trip to Kentucky to visit a friend whose parents owned slaves (Kirkham 28). Although at the time Stowe did not mention

anything about her impressions of slaves and slavery, she did use this firsthand experience of hers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Kirkham 28). Mary Dutton, who accompanied Stowe on her trip, later commented that Stowe

> did not seem to notice anything that happened, but sat much of the time as though abstracted in thought. When the negroes did funny thing and cut cup capers, she did not seem to pay the slightest attention to them. Afterwards, however, in reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I recognized scene after scene of that visit portrayed with the most minute fidelity, and knew at once where the material for that portion of story had been gathered. (Kirkham 28)

Stowe was also familiar with the writings of Lydia Maria Child, the narratives of ex-slaves as well as with other forms of abolitionist literature. She drew closely from those texts to create a vivid and realistic picture of life in the south. Numerous scholars have speculated that Stowe created George Harris character using Frederick Douglass as a prototype. On July 9th, 1851, Stowe wrote a letter to Frederick Douglass requesting information about cotton plantations and what it meant to be a field slave:

> You may perhaps have noticed in your editorial readings a series of articles that I am furnishing for the Era under the title of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the lowly,' In the course of my story, the scene will fall upon a cotton plantation. I am very desirous hence to gain information from one who has been an actual labourer on one, and it occurred to me that in the circle of your acquaintance there might be one who would be able to communicate to me such information as I desire. (Kirkham 28)

While we do not know for sure whether Frederick Douglass ever replied to Stowe's letter or provided her with the information requested, we can safely assume Stowe was familiar with Douglass's narrative and could have used it as a starting point for her novel. In *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe acknowledged the fact that she used numerous slave narratives as a base for her work.

Stowe's work attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of slavery in the American south. After exposed first to the mildest form of slavery in the Shelby's home in Kentucky, the author takes the reader further south to the aristocratic plantation of Augustine St. Claire where cruel neglect and total disorder contrast severely with the harmony of the Shelby's domestic atmosphere. However, even St. Claire's plantation seems agreeable compared to the wickedness and suffering that surround Legree's plantation in Louisiana. As Uncle Tom takes a journey down the river, so does the reader. The contented, domestic atmosphere of the Shelby's household clearly contrasts with the disorganized St. Claire estate where slaves do not suffer much violence by their master and yet must endure the cruelty of the mistress. At the end comes Legree's plantation – seemingly abandoned by God—where the mistress is entirely absent.

Jane Tompkins argues that every character in the novel, including that of the plantation mistress, "comes to be apprehended in terms of every *other* character, scene and incident" (136). Thus, every mistress in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is seen comparatively with other southern women in the novel as well as through her slaves. Moreover, as Jean Fagan Yellin points out, "the women Stowe portrays in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* do not merely exist within the system of chattel slavery; they are largely defined by their virtuous relationships to this system. Repeatedly—inevitably—they make choices and engage in

actions that relate to the slavery question" (90). Thus, Emily Shelby and Marie St. Claire, Christian white women of the south, first enact these moral choices; later Mrs. Bird and Rachel Halliday, white women of the free states familiar with slavery, re-enact these same choices. These choices also manifest themselves in the manner in which the slaves in all three plantations respond to the treatment they received from the master and the mistress. Those in the Shelby's household take pride in their family; the ones in the St. Claire's house are spoiled, selfish, disorganized but still able to keep their human nature. The slaves on the Legree's plantation, however, have become brutes—morally and physically degraded, they pray for nothing else but death.

One way to address the range of southern women depicted in Stowe's work is to consider their representation according to the reigning ideology of domesticity and Stowe's own ideal of the southern lady, which she forms in the novel with reference to household management and relationship to slaves:

> South as well as north, there are women who have an extraordinary talent for command, and tact in educating. Such are enabled, with apparent ease, and without severity, to subject to their will, and bring into harmonious and systematic order, the various members of their small estate,--to regulate their particularities, and so balance and compensate the deficiency of one by the excess of another; as to produce a harmonious and orderly system. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 308-309)

The Shelbys govern their house with love, tact and pride. Even their slaves take special pride in having Mr. and Mrs. Shelby as their masters. This pride is clearly articulated in Aunt Chloe's words to young George:

> Dem Lincons an't much count no way!...I mean set along side our folks. They's 'spectable folks enough in a kinder plain way; but, as to gettin' up anything in style, they don't begin to have a notion on 't. Set Mas'r Lincon, now, alongside Mas'r Shelby! Good Lor! And Missis Lincon,—can she kinder sweep it into a room like my missis,—so kinder splendid, ye know! O, go way! Don't tell me nothin' of dem Lincons! (Stowe 38)

Mrs. Shelby epitomizes Stowe's definition of woman popular at the mid-nineteenth century. For Stowe, the true southern lady is feminine, compassionate, and committed to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, self-sacrifice. She protects her family as well as her slaves. Mrs. Shelby has strong feelings towards her slaves, particularly towards Tom, Eliza and her son. She treats all of them with genuine affection and is responsible for the moral upbringing on the plantation. Mrs. Shelby has taught her slaves the duties and obligations of Christian marriage and she recognizes slaves' marriage as legitimate even though the laws of society do not see it as such. She exemplifies the kindly plantation mistress who cares for the moral education and the physical health of her servants. She conforms to the ideal of the planter's wife as "the heart and soul" of the plantation system, whose benevolent rule extends over the whole household. Stowe's Mrs. Shelby reflects not only the cultural assumption of the planter's wife established by the cult of true womanhood, but also what Stowe sees as the elite white woman.

Stowe acknowledges that Mrs. Shelby is "a fair type of the very best class of Southern women" and that her Kentucky household is "the fairest side of slave-life, where indulgence and good-natured forbearance are tempered by just discipline and religious instruction" (51). The author describes Mrs. Shelby as

> a woman of high class, both intellectually and morally. To that natural magnanimity and generosity of mind which one often marks as characteristic of the women in Kentucky, she added high moral and religious sensibility and principle, carried out with great energy and ability into practical results. Her husband…gave her unlimited scope in all her benevolent efforts for the comfort, instruction, and improvement of her servants. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 52-53)

But even Mrs. Shelby cannot escape the tension that exists between her moral Christian views and the reality of her life. Mr. Shelby's traffic in slaves renders her philosophy of life inconsistent with its application. Cultural assumptions require her to instill moral value in her servants while her Christian nature forces her to admit that slavery is wrong. Just like Mary Chesnut, Mrs. Shelby pronounces slavery "God's curse" for what the institution does to white as well as black families. The clash of myth and reality is obvious in Mrs. Shelby's words:

> O, Mr. Shelby, I have tried—tried most faithfully, as a Christian woman should—to do my duty to these poor, simple, dependent creatures. I have cared for them, instructed them, watched over them, and know all their little cares and joys, for years; and how can I ever hold up my head again among them, if, for the sake of a little paltry gain, we sell such a faithful, excellent, confiding creatures as poor Tom, and tear from him in a moment all we have taught him to love and value? I have taught them the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife; and how can I bear to have this open acknowledgment that we care for no tie, no

> duty, no relation, however sacred, compared to money…This is God's curse on slavery!—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. It is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours…but I though I could gild it over,—I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom—fool that I was! (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 83-84)

Although helpless to overrule it legally or to prevent the selling of Tom and Eliza's son, Mrs. Shelby at least cries out against the brutality of the system as she recognizes that nothing justifies the breaking of families and family relations. The kindness of Mrs. Shelby towards her slaves does not go unappreciated by the latter. When Eliza escapes, Sam and Andy are supposed to help Haley in his pursuit. Sam, a nineteen-year-old slave, first shows extreme willingness to catch Eliza in hopes of gaining his master's goodwill. However, as soon as he learns from Andy that Mrs. Shelby would rather see Eliza escape, he quite enthusiastically foils Haley's pursuit. His actions are governed by the kindness of his mistress who considers her servants not simply property but part of the household as well. It is because of Mrs. Shelby's upholding of Christian values and right action that Marie St. Claire becomes, by contrast, such a despicable character whose cruel nature is so shocking.

Marie St. Claire is probably the most remarkably exasperating female character in the novel. Once a reigning New Orleans belle, she had faded into an irritable, self-pitying, monstrously selfish hypochondriac who is incapable of running a household or instituting order among her servants. She complains about everything and everybody.

Marie St. Claire is Mrs. Shelby's opposite. Unlike Mrs. Shelby, who is described by the author as "a fair type of the very best class of southern women," Marie St. Claire is "the type of a class of women not peculiar to any latitude, nor any condition of society" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 242). Nevertheless, with the absolute control that slavery permits her, Marie St. Claire does not hesitate to inflict "the most disgraceful and violent punishments" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 465). While Emily Shelby was considered the ideal southern woman, Marie St. Claire is not even a complete woman for she has no heart, just a dead soul. While Mrs. Shelby stands by powerless to intervene when her husband buys and sells slaves, Marie St. Claire has such power but not even once considers using it to help alleviate the harshness of slavery or prevent the separation of families.

Unlike Mrs. Shelby, Marie St. Claire represents the antithesis of a mother, wife, and a southern lady; rather, she is a "woman with no heart," a "yellow, faded, sickly woman, whose time was divided among a variety of fanciful diseases, and who considered herself, in every sense, the most ill-used and suffering person in existence" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 243). Her Christian principles are limited to mere mimicking of biblical justifications of slavery. In a chapter devoted entirely to housekeeping, Stowe opposes Marie's lethargy and lack of domesticity with Ophelia's frenetic activity and Mrs. Shelby's structured organization. Put side by side with a northern and a southern woman's concept of domesticity, Marie's inability to manage her household once again proved Stowe's point that she is not "a whole woman" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 243).

Moreover, in terms of her duty as a mother and a wife, Marie St. Claire proves to be completely inadequate and experiences failure in every aspect of the cult of domesticity. Because she is unable to lavish love and comfort on her daughter or on her

husband, Marie is described as insufficient. St. Clair intimates this when he says, "Had his wife been a whole woman, she might yet have done something as woman can—to mend the broken threads of life" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 214). Rather, Marie appears to be the most selfish mother of all. As Stowe points out

> Marie St. Clair had taken no notice of [her] child's gradually decaying health and strength, because she was completely absorbed in studying two or three different new forms of disease to which she believed herself was a victim. It was the first principle of Marie's belief that nobody ever was or could be so great a sufferer as *herself*; and, therefore, she always repelled quite indignantly any suggestion that any one around her could be sick (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 397)

Selfish and self-absorbed, Marie St. Claire provides an exemplar of the worst a plantation mistress can be. Born in a wealthy southern family and expected to exemplify the characteristic features that define the lady, the wife of St. Clair is nothing more than a "self-pitying shrew—an acute but cruel caricature of the Southern lady" (Fiedler 112). Marie St. Claire is an example why the problem of slavery cannot be solved by the simple shift of power to women because—unlike Emily Shelby, who always felt that slavery is wrong—Marie St. Claire has always felt it to be right and justified.

Mrs. Shelby is not the only female character in the novel that presents the lens through which to examine the true nature of Marie St. Claire. Another important, though briefly mentioned, plantation mistress is St. Claire's mother. Although married to a whining and selfish wife, Augustine never forgets what he has learned under the influence of his noble mother. His father had managed a plantation of five hundred slaves

and though he had been kind and just in his treatment of them, he still regarded them as mere property. His wife, Augustine's mother, however, constantly read to him the Bible and discussed the evils of slavery. Not having the power to change the status of the slaves, she, nevertheless, worked hard to ameliorate the harshness imposed on the slaves. Even Augustine St. Clair realizes the vast gap that exists between his mother's behavior and that of his wife: his mother was "divine!...there was no trace of any human weakness or error about her; and everybody that lives to remember her, whether bond or free, servant, acquaintance, relation, all say the same…She was a direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 333).

In addition, unlike Marie St. Claire, Augustine's mother suffered in the "abyss of injustice and cruelty" that slavery imposed upon her, understanding the meaning and value of the human soul, even the souls of the slaves (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 337). Similarly to Mrs. Shelby, Augustine's mother pronounces slavery to be a curse for both oppressed and oppressor and never even tries to justify the wrongdoing of the system. As a true Christian, she read the Bible to find moral and religious comfort rather than to find validation of the existence of slavery. As a true southern lady, she demonstrates submissiveness and obedience to her husband while at the same time she exhibits devotion and compassion towards her slaves. Augustine's mother exemplifies the best characteristics of the cult of domesticity and true womanhood and lives up to the ideal of the southern plantation mistress.

Another important female character in the novel, though not a plantation mistress in the direct sense of the word, is Mrs. Bird, Senator Bird's wife. Mrs. Bird has a high degree of influence over her domestic world, successfully exerting her authority over her

husband "more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument" and bringing him finally to act on the feelings of his "humane and accessible nature" rather than on the "political sophistry of his arguments" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 143). Stowe described Mrs. Bird not merely in connection to her willingness to help Eliza as a woman, but also as an exemplar of mother and a wife. As Stowe explains, Mrs. Bird's world centers around her devotion to her husband and her children, a characteristic feature of any lady, whether southern or northern. As the theme of femininity, womanhood, and motherhood appear consistently throughout the novel, not surprisingly Mrs. Bird can be seen as Stowe's ideal of the lady who reacts against slavery from an emotional and a logical point of view.

Focusing on the issues of slavery and what it means to be a slave in the antebellum south, Child's short stories and *Appeal,* together with Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or Life Among the Lowly,* provides a interesting context in exploring the representation of southern women in abolitionist documents. Written for the specific cause of the abolitionist movement, their works address the slavery debate while offering glimpses into the life of the plantation mistress. Whereas Child identifies some of the characteristic features of the mistress, Stowe goes further in developing the full range of mistresses that exist in the South from the perspective of a northern abolitionist woman. Through her portrayal of Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, Augustine's mother and Marie St. Claire, Stowe builds on Child's legacy and provides northern readers with a gallery of female characters that demonstrate the conflicted nature of the mistress given the influence of slaveholding society and antebellum culture on her participation in the slave system.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND HARRIET JACOBS:

OR HOW THE SLAVES SAW THE MISTRESS

In the past several decades historians and literary scholars have studied the antebellum slave narratives both as historical representations of slavery and as literary works. Scholarship focusing upon the writing of ex-slaves has flourished over the years.[7] Slave narratives are discussed primarily as historical documents representing slavery as it is, as fictional accounts, or as a combination of both. William Andrews, John Blassingame, Marion Starling, Frances Smith Foster, Robert Stepto and others have tried

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[7] Marion Starling's 1949 dissertation *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History* was among the first serious studies of the slave narrative. Although not published until 1981, Starling's work nevertheless represents one of the first meticulous and comprehensive analyses of the slave narrative genre. Her dissertation pioneered the study of the antebellum narrative and brought into light over 6000 documents produced by ex-slaves. Starling argues that those documents contain valuable information about the "peculiar institution," facts that can no longer be ignored. Since Starling's dissertation and George Rawick's success in getting the WPA narratives into print, the study of nineteenth century African-American writing has grown tremendously. As Katherine Heenan notes, "the slave narrative has moved from the margins of historical and literary study to a central position within the field" (4). Numerous books that focused on slavery and the slaves' experience came into print. John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* (1972), Robert Stepto's *Behind the Veil* (1979), Frances Foster's *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (1982), Henry Louis Gates and Charles T. Davis's *The Slave Narrative* (1985), and William Andrew's *To Tell a Free Story* (1986) and *African – American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1993) have contributed significantly to the study of the slave narrative and its conventions.

to properly place the slave narrative genre within the context of African-American literature.

Scholars have explored numerous themes peculiar to the slave narratives—how they showed that slaves suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually under slavery; how slaves longed for freedom and tried to resist slavery in every possible way and how slavery as a social system was ultimately destroying masters as well as slaves. One theme less commonly explored is the slave mistress: how male and female slaves saw the mistress differently as a result of their gender and daily responsibilities on the plantation. While male slaves (such as Frederick Douglass) witnessed the corrupting effect that slavery had even on the kindest mistress, female slaves (such as Harriet Jacobs) were the ones who most often had close encounters with the planter's wife.

Few scholars have examined the role of gender-related differences in the portrayal of the mistress by male and female slaves. Since gender influenced the way bondage was experienced, it naturally influenced how black men and women saw their mistresses, and this accounts for the different portrayals of the mistress in Douglass's and Jacobs's texts. While both authors expose the horrid effect that slavery had on the wife of the slaveholder, Jacobs's account is much more detailed and revealing. Douglass's second-hand knowledge of the plantation mistress allows him to see the many different sides of the latter and to recognize the tendencies in the mistress's life and personality that become more fully pronounced in Jacobs' depiction.

There is no question that in antebellum America former slaves were writing for a white audience. Their texts were designed primarily to convince a white northern audience that slavery was wrong—not just for the slaves but for everyone. Wronged

mistresses were depicted as cruel and vindictive, but they were also constructed as victims themselves of an institution that allowed sexual degradation of black women and forced an acceptance of double standards on white women. The autobiographical writings of Douglass and Jacobs thus reflect their relationships to white women in ways determined by diverse literary purposes, by the limitations of the genre, and particularly by the difference in gender.

Much of the earlier critical discussion of the slave narratives focused on the truthfulness of the text and the value of the slaves' accounts as historical documents. For years scholars had dismissed slave narratives, convinced that the texts were creations of abolitionists. The matter of truth and the slave narrative certainly cannot be dismissed. The narratives were, after all, the greatest weapon of the American abolitionist movement. Because of the importance of the slave narrative in the national debate on slavery, authenticity was naturally an essential issue. Slave narratives "were designed to enlighten audiences about the facts of slavery and to excite them to work for the abolishment of the institution and racial discrimination" (Foster xxx). As a critical document in the abolitionist movement, the slave narrative was subjected to close scrutiny from both proslavery and anti-slavery supporters. Unsurprisingly, discussions of slave narratives have evolved primarily around the authenticity of the texts. As Francis Foster observes,

> historians…debated their [the slave narratives'] value for revealing the "truth" about slavery. Ulrich B. Phillips dismissed slave narratives on the grounds that most "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful."… Kenneth Stampp conceded an

> "urgent need for data" from the slaves' point of view but he concludes that "direct evidence form the slaves themselves is hopelessly inadequate. (xvii)

No serious study of antebellum slave narratives can easily dismiss the question of authenticity and truth. Since the purpose of the slave narratives is to support the abolitionist movement and to reveal the truth about slavery for that particular cause, it is understandable why a more skeptic audience might question the authenticity of the narrator and his or her account.

As previously mentioned, defining autobiography is a difficult task. In this study, I am far less interested in evaluating the autobiographical value of these works; rather, I examine their importance as literary works. After all, as Francis Foster notes, "Why …should I refrain from serious consideration of these works until I could verify who wrote what at what time and under what circumstances?" (xix). Instead of focusing on analyzing the authenticity of Jacobs and Douglass, my study examines the way gender and the rhetorical situation affect thematic content in those two slave narratives.

The difference in gender and the tension between public and private discourse urge us to rethink the portrayal of the plantation mistress. What is the relationship that exists between the political purpose of both Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives and the way they recount their experience under slavery? How much do they say and how much do they leave out? More importantly, how do their texts reconstruct the life of the plantation mistress from the perspective of ex-slaves who experienced slavery differently because of their gender? What made Harriet Jacobs declare that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (207)?

The dominating nineteenth-century ideology in the South demanded moral superiority from white women and sexual availability from the black while at the same time requiring mistresses and female slaves to live together on the plantation. Both southern women's private papers and slave narratives testify to the contradiction between social expectation and the reality of women's lives. While white women's journals and correspondence reveal the frustration of the slave mistress both with her female slaves and her husband's and father's behavior, it is primarily the slave narratives that present a detailed representation of the master-mistress-slave relationship. As Minrose Gwin observes, "it is in slave narratives, not in the white women's journals and reminiscences, that the jealous mistress springs up to life in all her fury and perversity" (40). Slavery "generates such female monsters, and they are best shown through their relationships with those over whom they exert the most power, yet with whom they should feel the most common bond—black women" (Gwin *Black and White Women* 36).

The accounts of women in their private letters and journals give ample evidence of the ambivalence plantation mistresses felt toward the roles imposed upon them as "mistress of the house." They are reported to be saints because their social role requires them to care for the domestic needs of the family and the plantation community, both white and black. Mary Chesnut, for instance, believed that her mother and grandmother had "less chance to live their lives in peace than if they were African missionaries" (163). It was particularly difficult to "live in negro villages," and "strive to ameliorate the condition of these Africans in every particular" and "to set them the example of a perfect life, a life of utter self-abnegation" when the slaves were, in many cases, their husbands' concubines and offspring. Chesnut calls the lot of plantation mistresses

> martyrdom…doing unpleasant duty among the Negroes with no reward but the threat of John Brown hanging like a drawn sword over your head in this world, and threats of what is to come to you from blacker devils in the next. (*MCCW* 163)

Given the strong provocation for resentment and the inability, in a patriarchal society, to place blame on their husbands, the urge to be a mean mistress and to take frustration out on offending servants was clearly too great for many women to withstand. Female slave owners like Mary Chesnut eliminate the mean mistress image entirely from their writing. Slave narratives, however, offer an insight into the cruel and often vindictive nature of the slave mistresses who time and again took out their frustration and helplessness on their slaves.

It is clear that sexual relations between male slaveholders and females slaves were exceedingly common in the antebellum south. Nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs as well as the WPA archives are full of evidence that masters, even when married, did not hesitate to engage in sexual relations with their slaves. Any offspring that resulted from such a relationship not only served to enhance the wealth of the planter but also cause the jealousy and rage of his wife.

Early in his life Douglass becomes aware of the sexual relations that exist between the female slaves and the master of the plantation. Even as a young boy he hears the whispering that his father was a white man, possibly his master. While in 1845 he cannot be certain of this (and in fact in his second autobiography he declares that his master was most certainly not his father), Douglass admits that it is not uncommon for a

slaveholder to engage in sexual relations with his female slaves. The result is a new class of slaves, "of but a few shades darker complexion than himself" (Douglass 19). These slaves

> invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others. They are, in the first place, a constant offense to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds form his black slaves. (19)

While Douglass acknowledges the tension that exists between the white mistress and the visibly biracial slaves, he makes little reference to any violent outbursts from his mistresses. Never employed in the domestic sphere of the plantation, Douglass did not have much interaction with the wife of the slave owner. His first mistress, Lucrecia Auld, is also suggested to be his half-sister. Very little is said about Lucrecia Auld. The reader is offered only a few glimpses into her character when she shows occasional kindness to young Frederick, like giving him a pair of new trousers. There is not much discussion about her role as a mistress on the plantation or her interaction with her slaves. The most memorable moment in connection with her position as a mistress of the plantation comes from her interaction with the slaves in reference to how they address her husband. Douglass describes her evident discomfort with her slaves' implicit refusal to address or refer to her husband Thomas as antebellum slaves conventionally spoke of and to their owners. Douglass remembers that Thomas Auld was

> a slaveholder, without the ability to hold or manage his slaves. We seldom called him "master," but generally addressed him by his "bay craft" title—'Capt. Auld.' It is easy to see that such conduct might do much to make him appear awkward…His wife was especially solicitous to have us call her husband "master." Is your *master* at the store?'—'Go and tell your *master*'—'I will make your *master* acquainted with your conduct'—she would say; but we were inapt scholars. (19)

Lucrecia Auld was not only attempting to compel her slaves to address her husband as she wished but also to revise their sense of him by persistently demonstrating at every opportunity that she viewed Thomas as their "master" rather than, as they would indicate in their address, a seaman who possessed them by mere accident of marriage.

Far more developed is the portrayal of Sophia Auld, Douglass's second mistress. Perhaps Sophia Auld stands for the best example of how slavery affected and corrupted not only the slave owners but their wives as well. The wife of Douglass's master Thomas Auld does not come from a slaveholding family; instead, she worked as a seamstress before getting married. Thus, at the beginning of her marriage, she is unfamiliar with South's peculiar institution. Douglass describes her as kind, gentle, Christian woman "who had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (43). At first she seems almost angelic with "the kindest heart and finest feelings" and with a face "made of heavenly smiles and her voice of tranquil music" (43). But "under the influence of slavery," Sophia Auld becomes warped and disfigured, unable to withstand "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" (Douglass 43).

Douglass was the first slave over whom Mrs. Auld had control and his initial encounters with her proved how little she knew about the social conventions governing the master-slave relationship. As Douglass observes, “She [Sophia Auld] did not deem it imprudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face” (43). Moreover, the mistress did not seem to understand that “for her to treat [Douglass] as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so” (47). While exposing Sophia Auld’s naïveté, Douglass also establishes the important concept that degrading habits of slavery can reach even the kindest mistress. Douglass pointedly declares that “it was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute” (47). Over time, as Mrs. Auld becomes schooled in the South’s social system, slavery “proved as injurious to her” as it did to slaves and Douglass in particular.

Schooled by her husband, Sophia Auld reverses her efforts in a vain attempt to prevent the young Douglass from becoming literate:

> She now commenced to practice her husband’s percepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other. (48)

Sophia Auld had learned to be a slaveholder, even though she never seems to act violently towards her slaves. In the language of abolitionist rhetoric Douglass records her moral decline in her physical appearance: "That cheerful eye…soon became red with rage; that voice, made of all sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (44). Slaveholding had made Sophia Auld into a hard mistress and this led to the complete breakdown of her moral character. When Douglass first went to live with the Aulds, Sophia Auld had been "a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman," full of charity to the less fortunate, a perfect embodiment of the cult of true womanhood. Slavery, however, "soon proved its abilities to divest her of these heavenly qualities" as Douglass argues (48). The story of Sophia Auld's decline illustrates the corruptive, destructive nature of a system that dehumanized not only the oppressed but the oppressors as well.

While Sophia Auld has just learned how to be a slave-holding woman and is still new to her power, there are a number of other mistresses in the *Narrative* who exemplify the typical southern mistress whose brutality is equal to that of the slave owner or the overseer. Douglass mentions at least two mistresses who constantly abuse their slaves. First, there is Mrs. Giles Hick who murdered one of her slaves, "a young girl between fifteen and sixteen years of age, mangling her person in most horrible manner, breaking her nose and breastbone with a stick" (36). Mrs. Hick not only killed her female slave but also managed to escape punishment for the action. There is also Mrs. Hamilton, the wife of Mr. Thomas Hamilton. While the master never whipped his slaves, Mrs. Hamilton did not hesitate to give them "a blow with the cowskin over the head or shoulders, often drawing the blood" (46). Douglass recalls of this mistress that she would station herself

in her home "in a large rocking chair with …with a heavy cowskin" (46). Mrs. Hamilton "dejected, emaciated, mangled and excoriated" her household slaves, Henrietta and Mary (46). Lashing, threatening, and cursing Mary and Henrietta, Mrs. Hamilton would then "go on, singing her…hymns" in a voice that "would charm you by [its] sweetness…as though her righteous soul were sighing for the holy realms of paradise" (Douglass 46).

With the exception of Sophia Auld, most of the southern white women are only sketchily portrayed in Douglass. They either represent a particular type of cruel mistress or mistresses who are virtually non-existent in the lives of the field working slaves. Sophia Auld belongs to neither one of these types; not quite skilled in the craft of being a mistress when she first meets Douglass, she quickly changes under the influence of her husband and the institution of slavery. But even then she does not reach the point of cruelty exhibit by Mrs. Hamilton or Mrs. Hicks.

While Frederick Douglass depicts a variety of slave mistresses without focusing on only one characteristic feature of the slaveholding woman, Harriet Jacobs recounts her female experience under slavery with a brutal master and a jealous mistress. Her narrative focuses on the controversial issue of miscegenation as it provides a context for examining the juxtaposition of the figure of the mistress with that of the female slave. A double victimization was often present for the slave girl who first became subject to the sexual abuse of the master and then the subsequent physical and mental abuse by the mistress. The white master was not held responsible for his actions towards his black female slaves; on the contrary, as Hazel Carby establishes, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a threat to the "conjugal sanctity" of the white mistress (27).

While many ex-slaves discuss the master-slave sexuality, the most extended commentary comes from Harriet Jacobs, who writing under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, told of the sexual pursuits of her master and the escalating jealousy of her mistress[8]. Pre-1980 analyses of Jacobs's work were not favorable. In *The Slave Community*, John Blassingame questions the narrative's orderly framework and the use of providential encounters:

> the story is too melodramatic: miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page. The virtuous Harriet sympathizes with her wretched mistress who has to look on all of the mulattoes fathered by her husband, she refuses to bow to the lascivious demands of her master, bears two children for another white man, and then runs away and hides in a garret in her grandmother's cabin for seven years until she is able to escape to New York… In the end, all live happily ever after. (373)

Published in 1862, Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* addresses an audience of Northern white women in an effort to gain political sympathy for the abolitionist movement. Her work represents the internal conflict of the slave girl caught between moral conventions and practical survival. As a literary text and a form of autobiography, the text also faces a conflict between political representation and literary convention. Jacobs writes her story not as a way of attracting attention to her own life, but as a

[8] Linda Brent refers to the character and the narrator of *Incidents* while the name Harriet Jacobs is used to denote the former slave who took the pseudonym of Brent to tell her story.

political statement, a "way of arous[ing] the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (120).

Written for the specific purpose of abolition, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is as much as a political work as an autobiography, and thus Jacobs must negotiate the tension between her private life and her political purpose. She employs a number of narrative strategies in order to convert her readers to her cause and to maintain her own position of authority which ultimately affects the way she portrays herself and the people around her, including her mistresses. The shape and strategies of the narrative are very much defined by Jacobs's audience. As she writes for a very specific audience and because her aim is to motivate them to fight for a cause, she has to be careful not to alienate them.

Jacobs recognizes that slaves and southern women interpret differently the sexual relations that exist of the plantation. She dedicates an entire chapter of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to "The Jealous Mistress." Here and elsewhere Jacobs maintained that mistresses whose husbands betrayed them felt no solidarity whatsoever with their slaves, a statement already suggested by Douglass in his *Narrati*ve. But while Douglass comments on the mistresses' attitude toward their husbands' biracial children, Jacobs focuses on how mistresses reacted towards the female slaves themselves. White women and black women all resented deeply the sexual advances of the masters towards the female slaves but for a different reason. The comments from the two sides of the color line are different, as Jacobs tells us: where white women saw sexual competition black women saw rape. For Jacobs, the prime victim was the slave woman, not the slaveholding woman, no matter how the latter perceived the situation.

Historians have arrived at different conclusions concerning the relationship between slave-owning and slave women in the antebellum south. Catherine Clinton stresses plantation mistresses' roles as nurturers, mediators, and nurses – but such roles are not the case with Mrs. Flint. Ann Firor Scott argues that the genteel image of the southern white womanhood was inadequate to describe the day-to-day life of the white woman in the antebellum south because the stereotype applied only to a small percentage of women and because it did not accurately portray the experience of even this elite group. As Jacobs reports there were certain mistresses, "honorable exceptions," who embodied the principles of the cult of true womanhood. Those women "exhorted their husbands to free those slaves towards whom they stood in a 'parental relation;' and their request was granted. These husbands blushed before the superior nobleness of their wives' natures" (Jacobs 160).

While most historians have focused on Linda Brent's relations with Dr. Flint and Mr. Sand, Hazel Carby argues that the "narrative was framed by Linda Brent's relationships to white mistresses" (51). The opening chapter of the narrative describes Linda's early disillusion with a mistress whom she trusted and loved. Brent remembers the earlier intimacy shared by her grandmother, mistress and herself; however, the social and racial inequality is soon revealed upon the death of the mistress. The kind mistress who at the deathbed of Linda's mother promised her that "her children [would] never suffer for anything" did not live up to her promise. The narrator uses the religious doctrine espoused by her kind mistress to condemn her actions and reveal her hypocrisy:

> My mistress had taught me the percepts of God's word:
> "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "Whatsoever ye

> would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them."
>
> But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. (128)

Linda Brent does not recount the incident only as a betrayal towards her; rather, as Hazel Carby suggests, she places it within the "history of acts of betrayal toward three generations of women in her family: herself, her mother and her grandmother. Each served as faithful servant, each trusted to the honor of her mistress, and each was betrayed" (Carby 52). Linda Brent's understanding of her mistress relies upon what Jacobs deems as an "act of injustice." For although the mistress might have been as kind as the slave girl's mother, the power imbalance between them made the relationship itself an "act of injustice." For this reason, the slave girl, the slave mother, and the slave mistress would always struggle to define their positions and distinguish the viewpoints of the oppressed and the oppressor.

Linda Brent describes her second mistress, Mrs. Flint, in ways that utilize the conventions of an antebellum ideal of womanhood while exposing them as contradictory:

> Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood tricked form every stroke of the lash. (Jacobs 132-133)

In this and many other instances the conventional figure of the plantation mistress is ironically undermined. The delicacy and sensitivity attributed to the southern lady appear as corrupt and superficial; they cover underlying strength and power in cruelty and brutality. Brent goes on to expose the violent nature of her mistress:

> She [Mrs. Flint] was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not served at the exact same time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meager fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings. (Jacobs 133)

Moreover, Mrs. Flint locks the cook away from her nursing baby for a whole day and night. Later in the narrative Brent recalls Mrs. Flint's treatment of her aunt, who was forced to lie at her mistress's door each night to attend to the white woman's needs.

However, no other female slave suffered from Mrs. Flint as Linda Brent did. Brent realizes that because of Dr. Flint's sexual advances she represents a threat to the dignity and pride of Mrs. Flint. Jacobs demonstrates the slave's capacity to understand the grief and pain of the mistress:

> She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed. (157)

Mrs. Flint is understandably degraded by her husband's treatment of Linda. However, instead of using this degradation as a bond between her and the slave girl, the mistress imitates the abusive power of Dr. Flint. The female slave becomes the object of jealousy and spite of her mistress. In her jealousy Linda's mistress becomes perversely cruel. Far

from adhering to the code of true womanhood which demanded piety and morality, the doctor's wife becomes an evil creature nurtured by the institution that allows her and her husband absolute power over the female slave. Jacobs makes it clear that she never "wronged her [Mrs. Flint], or wished to wrong her; and one word of kindness from her would have brought me to her feet" (156).

Brent's mistress, in this case, was so ashamed of her husband's behavior that rather than protect Brent from him, she developed jealousy and resentment towards her. When at first her mistress expressed sadness at Brent' plea for help, Jacobs wrote of feeling "grief' for her. Soon after, however, Brent was "convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride" rather than from empathy for Brent's plight. Jacobs' description of sexual abuse and her mistress's 'immoral' lack of compassion and understanding makes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* a valuable resource in examining the discrepancy between the myth of the southern lady and the actual reality of their lives as well as their true nature.

As Minrose Gwin suggests, Jacobs's discourse is "scathingly ironic, particularly as it applies to Mrs. Flint" (63). In the actions of her mistress towards her and towards other black women, Jacobs sees not only the cruelty perpetuated by the system but also the hypocrisy of the slave society. Jacobs depiction of Mrs. Flint's immorality is designed to shock those who believed that the plantation mistress was, as Catherine Clinton puts it, "the conscience of the slave South" (189). Mrs. Flint's most memorable characteristic is the jealous rage which she directs towards young Linda. Jacobs confess "I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grace opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress" (154). Rather than protecting the

slave girl from the master, the mistress more typically developed jealousy and resentments towards her. Jacobs accuses her mistress of malevolence towards her female slaves while it was Mrs. Flint who “possessed the key to her husband’s character” (154). Mrs. Flint had the power to alter her husband’s behavior but instead she chose to blame her husband’s victims while presenting herself as victim.

Gwin points out that Jacobs “seems at times to transform *Incidents* into a vehicle of rage directed towards her former mistress” (65). While such reading can seem exaggerated, it is clear that Jacobs emphasizes the fact that her mistress had the power to intervene in behalf of her female slaves but chose not to do so. Jacobs speculates that the white woman suffered from her husband’s betrayal and since she could not control her husband’s desire, revenged herself on the only possible person – the slave girl.

Drew Gilpin Faust theorizes, “blacks and whites struggled unceasingly within the slave system, with each race endeavoring to extend its control to maximum possible limits” (15). Harriet Jacobs frankly discloses the immorality of the institution of slavery imposes on everyone involved:

> I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white father cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation. (178)

Although Jacobs emphasizes the degenerative effects of slavery on all members of society, she feels particular pity for the daughters and wives of slave holders. To the idealistic young girls who marry southern slave owners she writes:

> To what disappointment they are destined! They young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness. (57)

Jealousy and hatred were the inevitable response of white women who virtually had no more control over the men in their patriarchal society than did the slaves. Charles Joyner explains that “the large number of plantation mulattoes contributed to the hostility felt by some mistresses toward their slaves. They considered black women promiscuous and directed their anger toward the slaves instead of toward their husbands” (62-3). Ironically, the status of these plantation mistresses as pure, ideal women according to the existing ideology exacerbated their helplessness. To confront the immortality of their husbands and to acknowledge the existence of interracial activities on the plantation would have meant to step down from their virtuous pedestals. Frustrated, they redirected their wrath on the slaves which only increased the violence already imposed on the latter. As is the case with Linda Brent, her mistress’s suspicion darkened the happiness of her marriage and made life miserable for the slaves under her power: “They [young female slaves] were the object of constant suspicion and malevolence. She [the mistress]

watched her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practiced in means to evade it" (154).

Although most of the discussion of southern white women in Jacobs's text focuses on Mrs. Flint, a number of other slaveholding mistresses make their appearance as well. Just like Douglass, Jacobs recognizes the existence of a few kind mistresses whose benevolence extends towards their slaves. One of these exceptional women is the mistress that aided Brent in her escape. Without the help of that kind woman Brent could hardly have successfully carried on her plan. The mistress, as Brent observes, "was unlike the majority of the slaveholders' wives" (232). She held many slaves and not only treated them kindly but never allowed any of them to be sold. With the risk of ruining her good name and her social position, that mistress chooses to help Linda Brent and hide her in her own house. While it does not seem that the kind mistress plans to liberate her own slaves, she does not hesitate to help the slaves of cruel masters and mistresses to achieve freedom.

The women in the narratives of slave owners and ex-slave tend to follow predictable gender role patterns established by the patriarchal plantation society that both genres reflect. In the historical person of the slave-owner wife, the image of the sainted matriarch and the counter-image of the mean mistress co-exist. Despite antebellum society's insistence upon the cult of true womanhood and the virtues of the southern lady, few southern women were able to live up to these preconceptions. Some were unable to escape the corrupting power of slavery and could not see their slaves as anything else but property. It is in ex-slave narratives that the cruel, jealous and vindictive nature of the southern mistress appears in its entirety. While male slaves were mostly employed in the

field and had limited contact with the mistress (and therefore, fewer observations as to the true nature of the mistress), female slaves were made fully aware of the conflicting personality of the plantation mistress. Frustrated with their helplessness and their husbands' unfaithfulness, the mistresses tended to express their aggravation upon the vulnerable slave, unwilling to comprehend both hers and the slave's position as victims of the institution of slavery.

INCIDENTS IN THE LIVES OF SLAVEHOLDING WOMEN:

WHAT MATTIE GRIFFITH AND MARY CHESTNUT

HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE SOUTHERN LADY

The ways in which American slavery significantly changed the lives of those in bondage have been well researched, studied and documented. However, less research has been done on how slavery affected the lives of those who maintained the bondage and more specifically southern white women. In the past twenty years scholars have tried to reconstruct the image of the plantation mistress based on southern white women's diaries, journals, and private papers. They have attempted to establish the complex relation existing between the slave mistresses and their slaves along with exposing the effect that the institution of slavery had both on slaveholders and their wives and daughters.

However, with the exception of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who briefly touches upon the literary and social conventions when addressing the question of authorship and truthful representation in different narrative forms, these scholars have overlooked what governs both white women's and slaves' portrayals of the plantation mistresses. The works of Mattie Griffith and Mary Boykin Chesnut present an opportunity to investigate how two white southern women depict the life of the plantation mistress. Even though each chose a different genre to chronicle her life, both emphasize certain features of the plantation mistress. Both Mattie Griffith and Mary Chesnut portray a gallery of slave mistresses while simultaneously unmasking the myth of the plantation mistress as a southern lady and an embodiment of "the cult of true womanhood." Their texts respond

to, confirm, and yet also challenge the stereotype of the slaveholding woman in the antebellum South already established by Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Scholars have noted the tension between the ideal of the antebellum southern lady and the reality of her existence. Florence King in *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* observes that "the cult of southern womanhood endowed her [the southern lady] with at least five totally different images and asked her to be good enough to adopt all of them" (32). For the southern woman "cultural prescriptions interacted in an elaborate and contradictory manner with practical conditions" (Clinton xiv-xv). While the cult of true womanhood expected and even obliged southern women to be refined and virtuous, weak, graceful, innocent, compassionate, benevolent, and kind, in real life very few plantation women could uphold these standards. The myth was at odds with the realities of the lives of plantation mistresses. It represents what they were supposed to be, not what they were.

That upper class southern women, at least, attempted to live up to the cultural norms is evident in their diaries and other writings. The diaries and the private papers prove to be valuable sources in revealing the tension between the reality of ordinary life and its corresponding tasks and the ideal of the pedestalized lady with its corresponding traits. They present a portrait of southern life unlike the popular mythology of Scarlett O'Hara and Tara. One of the most well-known diaries of a southern woman is Mary Chesnut's, which gives a rather rare presentation of antebellum women's lives. As Melissa Mentzel claims,

> Chesnut's work is unique among Southern Diaries by women…because of her chosen perspective. The breadth of Chesnut's picture of the South and

> the issues concerning slavery and her patriarchal society which she raises in her journal make it difficult to fit her work into the context of southern literary history (54).

Much confusion has arisen over Mary Chesnut's diary and almost all studies and articles have concentrated on questioning the text's authenticity and genre[9]. At her death in 1886, Chesnut left behind multiple versions of the diary kept during the Civil War and the existence of multiple versions has sparked criticism from literary scholars and historians. One of the critics who most passionately attacks Chesnut's work and revisions is Kenneth S. Lynn. In "The Masterpiece that Became a Hoax," he condemns her "fraudulent diary" that presents "a trap for the unwary" reader and scholar (9). Lynn considers Mary Chesnut "a deceiver," "an ambitious but frustrated author" who "wrote a novel about the South during the Civil War and called it a diary" (9). In recent years, most scholars have agreed that Chesnut's private writing is far from being a fictional novel and presents a valuable account of the years before the Civil war from the perspective of an elite white southerner.

Mary Chesnut did not intend her writing to be completely and purely autobiographical. Her existing diary represents a carefully and meticulously prepared selection of her original entries. As the wife of one of the most prominent figures in the Old South, Chesnut had the responsibility to maintain a public image. In fact, when she revised it for publication, her diary became a representation of the experience of southern

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[9] See for instance Clara Juncker's "Writing Herstory: Mary Chesnut's Civil War", Michael P. Johnson's "Mary Boykin Chesnut's Autobiography and Biography: A Review Essay", Woodward's "Mary Chesnut in Search of Her Genre" etc.

women in antebellum southern culture. Instead of narrating her own life, Chesnut interprets the events in America before and during the Civil war and what the war meant to white southerners. At the same time the text questions and explores what it means to be a white woman in the south and a woman writing history. Chesnut was a woman in a society controlled by men and thus in public she had to contend with the South's restrictions on woman's behavior. In her writing, however, she could express freely her frustration and anger with slavery and southern life.

Chesnut's most open criticism of slavery comes as a response to Senator Charles Sumner's famous 1860 address "The Barbarism of Slavery." His speech focused on the immorality of slavery as well as on its unconstitutional and destructive force. While Mary Chesnut's husband James Chesnut had a chance to respond publicly to the Senator's speech (as a member of the white male class, he could freely express his opinion in public), Mary Chestnut could only articulate her ideas and beliefs in her private diary. In it she could record thoughts and observations that she would never reveal otherwise, which explains the absence of explicit criticism of slavery in her later versions of the diary. Chesnut could not publish her diary in its original form because of her social status and class affiliation. By assuming a public voice and expressing an opinion she could jeopardize her reputation as a southern lady. So in a hope of publication Chesnut had to make compromises and mute her explicit criticism.

Unlike many other women, Mary Chesnut found peace and happiness away from home. As she declares, "My experience reverses all others—private life is wrangles & rows—& strife & ill blood & neighbourhood & family snarls. *Public* life has been peace & happiness, *quiet*& comfort" (*PMC* 146). It is on the plantation that Chesnut felt most

artificial and on display. At Mulberry she was presumed to be submissive, obedient, less opinionated and vocal, a woman without a voice, a southern lady. Moreover, on the plantation Chesnut always felt compared to her mother-in-law, Mary Cox Chesnut, a perfect embodiment of the cult of true womanhood. As Nell Irvin Painter observes "Mary Cox Chesnut represented the kind of elite ideal, for with perfect good manners and seeming effortlessness she ran a household of twenty-five servants and an extended Chesnut family of six adults" (23). Mary Chesnut herself admires her mother-in-law for being "free from evil thoughts" and willing to "make it up to the negroes for being slaves" (*MCCW* 200- 201). She goes on to narrate how Mrs. Chesnut

> spends hours every day cutting out baby cloths for the negro babies. This department is under her supervision, she puts little bundles of things to be made in everybody's workbasket and calls it sewing society. She is always ready with an ample wardrobe for every newcomer. Then the mothers bring their children for her to prescribe and look after whenever they are ailing…These people are simply devoted to her. (*MCCW* 202)

Mrs. Chesnut personifies what it means to be a southern lady according to the image established by the cult of true womanhood – she follows the cardinal principles of womanhood and extends her benevolence and kindness to her family as well as to her servants. Chesnut's mother-in-law resembles Stowe's Mrs. Shelby – they both care for their servants and slaves although they are not willing to sacrifice the material benefits that come from slavery. Following the cult of domesticity they both care for the moral education and physical health of the slaves. Both women conform to the ideal of the

planter's wife, "the heart and soul of the plantation system, whose benevolent rule extended over the whole household" (Gwin 21).

With Mrs. Chesnut on the plantation and in charge of the household it is understandable why Mary Chesnut was self-conscious that she could not fulfill her role as a woman in a strongly patriarchal society which limited upper-class women to the roles of mothers and wives. While Mrs. Chesnut had many children and twenty-seven grandchildren, Mary Chesnut was childless which makes her, according to Colonel Chesnut's definition, "a *useless* woman" (*PMC* 44).[10]

It is also at Mulberry that Chesnut witnessed the interracial sexual activity that existed between white men and slave women. She identified this activity as the root of evil in southern society. Chesnut argued that virtuous white women were forced to live surrounded by white men's mistresses and their mulattoes. She even suspected that her father-in-law, Colonel John Chesnut, had several children by one of his slaves named Rachel. As Mary Chesnut wrote in June 1861, she did not like to stay on the plantation since "*Rachel* - & *her brood* - make this place a horrid nightmare to me. I believe in nothing with this before me" (*PMC* 82). Her declaration clearly indicates that Colonel Chesnut had children from one of his female slaves and that his infidelity to Mrs. Chesnut is well known, though not discussed by the family.

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[10] On March 21, 1861 Chesnut wrote that Colonel Chesnut said to his wife "*You* have not been a *useless* woman in this world" because she has so many children. (*PMC* 44-45). Chesnut, "the childless wretch," clearly expresses her pain: "& what of me! God help me—no good have I done—to myself or any one else—with the [power] I boast so of—the power to make myself loved. Where am I now. Where are my friends. I am allowed to have none" *(PMC* 45).

Chesnut freely expressed the frustration that many southern mistresses struggled with.[11] Aware of the ideology of domesticity, southern white women could not always live up to the expectation that society imposed on them. While they enjoyed the benefits that slavery provided, they also came to realize that slavery was a curse both for slaves and for them as well. As Marli Weiner argues, the only power that white women possessed through the ideology of domesticity was moral authority (279). In reality, however, on the plantation women were denied that power as well. Every day on the plantation, mistresses saw a reminder of their husbands' infidelities in the face of the female slaves and their mulatto children. Moreover, the practice of miscegenation was something that elite southern women were never supposed to see, or at least not acknowledge its existence. This moral dilemma directly influenced the lives of southern women and their views regarding slavery.

Mary Chesnut had real doubts about the morality of the institution of slavery. Although she enjoyed both its material benefits and the social world it created, she deplored the effects it had on southern women, arguing that slavery degraded morals and encouraged the brutality of white men. Chesnut unmasks the joyful happy life of the plantation mistress. She rejects the fantasy of the cheerful life of the southern woman on the plantation and "the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses"

[11] As Marli Weiner points out, slaveholding women often recognized the extent of their moral responsibility and often struggled with their inability to conform to the behavior expected of them. White men may have defined women as guardians of morality but they did not necessarily behave according to women's notion of what was proper (282-4).

(Stowe 50).[12] Instead Chesnut offers a different reality, an ongoing challenge to the slaveholder's wife posed by the institution of slavery.

In March 1861 Chesnut made her famous comment:

> I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land....Men and women are punished when their masters & mistresses are brutes & not when they do wrong – & then we live surrounded by prostitutes. An abandoned woman is sent out of any decent house elsewhere. Who thinks worse of a Negro or Mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God forgive *us*, but ours is a *monstrous* system & wrong & iniquity.... This *only* I see: like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the Mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children – and every lady tells you who is the father of all mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think. (*PMC* 42)

It is understandable why Chesnut could never express her condemnation of slavery in public – after all she was the wife of James Chesnut, a supporter of slavery and opponent of Senator Sumner. Chesnut's assessment of the evils of slavery is clear: it is an institution that dehumanizes the master along with the slave. But it has even a more sordid effect on the life of the southern woman. And while she cannot publicly

[12] Stowe claims that "the mildest form of the system of slavery is to be seen in the state of Kentucky" where "[w]hoever visits some estates there, and witnesses the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dread the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution, and all that" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 50-51).

acknowledge the validity of Sumner’s argument, in the privacy of her diary she can agree with him and question the authority of men over women. For Chesnut the hidden evil of slavery is miscegenation, that “sorest spot” that Harriet Beecher Stowe did not touch when she made Legree a bachelor.

According to Chesnut, the practice of miscegenation is facilitated and even caused by the patriarchal structure of southern society. She believes that miscegenation dehumanizes everyone involved, especially the wife of the master. The southern lady had to pretend to the absurd notion that the children who “exactly resemble” the white children appear out of nowhere or simply “drop from the clouds” (*PMC* 42). But to discuss freely miscegenation, no matter how delicately and discreetly, was unthinkable in nineteenth century America. A real southern lady was expected never to know anything about such matters. As Mary Chesnut says “The *ostrich* game is thought a Christian act,” and “pure and minded ladies never touch upon [these matters], even in their thoughts” (*MCCW* 54). For a woman to admit that she knew about them, let alone to accuse her husband or father or even father-in-law of miscegenation, meant to go against the social conventions of the antebellum South. Thus the southern plantation mistress is caught in a vicious circle: she knows about white men’s affairs with slave women, she is forced into silence about the subject and in her silence she becomes an unwilling supporter of slavery.

Given the reigning social ideology regarding southern women in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Chesnut undertook an extensive revision process before she decided to publish her diary. In its original form for her eyes only she could allow herself the freedom to criticize society and its conventions. For the public eye, however,

she had to alter some of her original statements. This does not necessarily mean that she changed her belief regarding slavery; on the contrary, she had to find a new line of attack. As a result her revised narrative contains concealed and somewhat ambivalent messages about slavery. In a way Chesnut is playing the "ostrich game." Through the words of Mrs. Middleton, an Englishwoman, she communicates her ideas about slavery:

> The Englishwoman hit the patriarchal system heavy blows. It hardly sounded decent: she scarcely found the patriarchy less degraded than their flocks and their herds, their Leahs and Rachels – and L and R's maidservants and their children, all dwelling under one tent. (*MCCW* 76)

What Chesnut could not say in her diary in first person, she expressed as through a third character. Thus, she can still point out the degradation of miscegenation while protecting publicly her image as an elite southern woman. Under the pretext of narrating the events during the Civil War and reporting people's comments, Chesnut can still condemn slavery and its evil.

Later in her revised diary Chesnut once again conceals her attack on slavery in someone else's statement. An unnamed person, presumably a woman, reveals that

> I hate slavery….What do you say to this? A magnate who runs a hideous black harem and its consequences under the same roof with his lovely wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head as high and poses as the model for all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him. From the height of his awful majesty he scolds and thunders at them, as if he never did wrong in his life. (*MCCW* 168)

The person goes on to claim that "His wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter" (*MCCW*69). The ideas presented as someone else's are clearly Mary Chesnut's. The statement echoes Chesnut's observation about how southern women had to pretend that the mulattoes on their plantations "drop from the clouds" (*PMC* 42).

Like many privileged white women Mary Chesnut resents white men's interactions with female slaves, and yet, she is also distressed by the female slaves themselves. In the narrative, Chesnut's first reference to slavery and to her feeling about the subject occurs when she sees a female slave at an auction. Chesnut writes:

> She [the female slave] was a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all—sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. (*MCCW* 15)

Much like Mrs. Flint, Chesnut tries to find fault in the female slaves' behavior that could provides reasonable explanation for the slave owners' sexual relations with the slaves. Though, unlike Mrs. Flint, Chesnut recognizes the wretchedness of the southern men, she too has little sympathy for the female slaves and refuses to see them as victims of the system. Rather, she considers southern women to be the real victims of the immorality and the evil of the slave system.

Mary Chesnut was not the only slaveholding woman to question the morality of slavery. Mattie Griffith, a southern woman from Kentucky, also realized the inhumanity

of slavery. While Chesnut never did anything against slavery, Griffith liberated her slave, joined the abolitionist movement and published a book criticizing slavery. Her work *Autobiography of a Female Slav*e presents a real challenge for critics who try to establish its proper place within the literature of antebellum America. First published anonymously in 1856 and initially believed to be a legitimate slave narrative, the work received attention both in Northern and Southern newspapers. It was several months after the publication that the author's identity was revealed. This revelation, however, did not change substantially the views of Griffith's readers or reviewers in the North – they still valued the book for its sincere representation of slavery regardless of the author's race.

What seems to trouble Griffith's audience during her time and continues to trouble her critics today is not her race. Rather, it is the genre that she chose for her book – published as an autobiography even though it was not the 'true' account of a former slave's life. An *Independent*'s reviewer was one of the first to disclose that "the author of this book knows what slavery is from observation of years; has been familiar with the system from childhood; was born and reared in the midst of it; is still, in fact, a nominal owner of slaves. This book is a story of fact." [13] Similarly, the front-page review of the book in the *Boston Evening Transcript* of December 3, 1856 also questioned the status of the book as an autobiography: "Its title indicates that it is an autobiography, yet it is not precisely so"

Not surprisingly the issue of the distinction between fact and fiction was also pointed out in several reviews in southern newspapers. The *Louisville Journal* wrote that

[13] *New York Independent*, cited in *Boston Evening Transcript*, December 3, 1856: 1.

> 'the Autobiography of a Female Slave,' just published by Redfield, shows that there is yet a deeper depth of anti-slavery fiction to which the authoress of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had not yet attained, and that it is possible to produce an anti- slavery novel of infinitely greater merit as a literary production and of vastly deeper infamy as a total misrepresentation of African slavery in the South than anything that has yet been published…. Considered merely as a literary production, independent of its gross misrepresentations, false theories, and most disgusting ultra anti-slavery aspirations, it evinces a high order of talent and literary genius.[14]

Griffith's work definitely raises questions about authenticity – to overlook these questions means to diminish the work and its value and importance. In its most simplistic form, authenticity of an "autobiography" can be defined as the degree to which the work reflects the experience of the author. In the case of slave narratives, it defines how much of the work is the slave's own account as opposed to being the creation of abolitionists. Griffith's work is neither an autobiographical account of her life, not completely a fictional one. She was an abolitionist but she was also a slaveholder herself: thus she had a first-hand experience. She observed the life of the slaves and lived that of the slaveholding mistress. Written solely on the basis of the author's observation of slave life in the south and her personal experience as a slaveholder, the book nevertheless addresses many of the issues that abolitionists and even southern women disclosed in private correspondence.

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[14] "A Remarkable Work." *The Liberator* 27.2 (January 9, 1857): 8

It is interesting to consider a particular episode in *The Autobiography of a Female Slave* which might be regarded as autobiographical in nature as far as Mattie Griffith is concerned. In chapter XVI, Ann narrates the story of a slaveholding lady from Kentucky whose whole wealth consisted of six slaves that she inherited from her family. This mistress decided to free all her slaves despite the fact that she came from the "pick and choose of the proslavery party" (Griffith 130). She could not continue to support the institution of slavery. This story is identical to Griffith's life. As Larry Ceplair explains, Mattie Griffith was born in Kentucky and raised by one of her father's slaves. When she turned nineteenth she freed her slaves and moved to the North. Although *The Autobiography of a Female Slave* is not Griffith's autobiography, it nevertheless contains a particular episode that certifies the existence of facts in this literary work.

It is unclear how much circulation the *Autobiography of a Female Slave* achieved beyond the circles of the supporters of the abolitionist movement. Larry Ceplair suggests that the book was not widely read by those who did not consider themselves abolitionists (220).[15] Thus, Griffith's work did not achieve a permanent status in American literature. In fact, as Joe Lockard points out, Mattie Griffith herself has been largely ignored by historians and literary critics. The first anthology of Southern Women's literature, *Southern Writing* (1870) did not contain any reference whatsoever to Mattie Griffith or her work (Lockard 424). Even thirty years later she did not receive much scholarly attention; the multi-volume *Library of Southern Literature* (1907) contains barely two lines of biography. (Lockard 425). Mattie Griffith was destined to become a "one book

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[15] Ceplair, Larry. "Mattie Griffith Browne: A Kentucky Abolitionist." *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 68 (April 1994): 219-231.

phenomenon" which encouraged readers to overlook her personal life and her writing career.

Little is known of Mattie Griffith's personal history before and immediately after she wrote *The Autobiography of a Female Slave*. Most of what we know comes to us from the personal correspondence of several noted abolitionists and Lydia Maria Child in particular. We do know that at the time she published her *Autobiography*, Mattie Griffith herself owned a number of slaves. Her work is simultaneously a fictional account of the life of a young female slave, Ann, and a testimony of a southern mistress. As a blend between fiction and fact Griffith's work presents a challenge to neat literary rubrics. Aside from the contemporary reviews, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* received little attention from critics. In fact, very few historians have examined the book in any detail. With the exception of Estelle Jelinek, Barbara Jean Ballard, and recently Joe Lockard, no comprehensive study of Griffiths' book has been undertaken.

When discussing Griffith's representation of the south and the plantation mistress it is relevant to keep in mind its limits as historical evidence. Though Griffith writes from personal experience (being raised and having lived in the south), her main goal in writing the book is to support the abolitionist movement. As an abolitionist text her narrative ultimately contains incidents that serve the cause and reinforce the evil of the institution of slavery. It is, therefore, not surprising that *Autobiography of a Female Slave* explores themes common to the genre of slave narratives – the cruelty of the master and the mistress, the beatings and punishments that slaves suffer, the separation of families at sales, and last but not least the threat of sexual assault of female slaves. Following the principles both of a slave narrative and a slave novel, Griffith presents the reader with a

variety of slaveholding women, just like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe did. The author's purpose is not to depict one evil and/or one kind mistress; rather, she intends her book to serve as a portrayal of life under slavery where one can encounter all types of slaveholding women, some good, some evil.

Through the eyes of Ann, a "mulatto," Griffith explores how the dominant nineteenth century ideology concerning women (the cult of true womanhood) does not apply in practice to slave women. The slave women do not have the possibility of adhering to the standards of purity, chastity, and modesty when faced with the harsh reality of the plantation life. Ann herself is an example of the existing sexual relations in the south: "My mother was a very bright mulatto woman, and my father, I suppose, was a white man, though I know nothing of him; for, with the most unpaternal feeling, he deserted me….my skin was no perceptible shade darker than that of my mistress" (Griffith 10).

Written in the tradition of the slave novel, Griffith's work follows the pattern already established by Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Just like Stowe, Griffith presents the readers with a gallery of southern women. There is Miss Betsy who, similarly to Mrs. Shelby in Stowe's book, genuinely cares about her slave and shows benevolence and kindness towards them. There is also Miss Jane, a more detailed and further developed portrayal of Marie St. Claire. While the latter spends most of her time complaining about her slaves without taking an active role around the household, Miss Jane cruelly asserts her authority on her father's plantation.

Very early in her childhood Ann comes to realize that her first mistress was both kind to her slaves and at the same time a firm believer in slavery as an institution. As Ann

recalls, "Miss Betsy, though a warm-hearted woman, was a violent advocate of slavery. I have since been puzzled how to reconcile this with her otherwise Christian character; and though she professed to love me dearly, and had bestowed so much attention upon the cultivation of my mind, and expressed it as her opinion that I was too pretty and white to be a slave, yet, if any one had spoken of giving me freedom, she would have condemned it as domestic heresy" (Griffith 12). Miss Betsy is almost an enigma. She cares for her slave while at the same time firmly believes and supports slavery. Ann's mistress exemplifies the southern white women who were good hearted and cared for their slaves even though they were not willing to sacrifice the material benefits that the institution of slavery provided them with. At the same time Miss Betsy personifies the southern lady: she is obedient and kind, compassionate and caring while upholding the morality of the plantation.

However, not all slave mistresses resemble Miss Betsy. In *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, the most developed portrayal of a southern white mistress is probably that of Miss Jane, the daughter of Mr. Peterkin. The cruelty with which she treats all her slaves is comparable only to that of slave masters and overseers. At some point Ann calls Miss Jane a murderess at heart, a "human hyena," suggesting her cruel and abusive nature: "A negro's scream of agony was music to her ears" (Griffith 280).

While throughout the book Miss Jane considers herself to be a southern lady, she could not have been further from exemplifying the cult of true womanhood advocated in the nineteenth century. As Marli Weiner points out, southern white women were encouraged to behave charitably towards black people (69). Miss Jane, however, never even deems it necessary to show any charity towards her slaves. For her, slaves are just a

nuisance, more of a burden than a commodity. She constantly complains how her slaves are the worst servants in the world and how they are ungrateful for all the care that Miss Jane and her family provide for them. Miss Jane is the exaggerated, very unfeminine and yet malicious lady of the house who uses the powers bestowed upon her by her class and social position to torture her slaves. On a number of occasions the narrator compares Miss Jane with her father. Throughout the novel, Miss Jane thinks of herself as a highly refined young lady and is often ashamed of her father's unpolished manners. However, as the narrator explains, earlier in the novel Miss Jane is said to quarrel "with the vulgar talk and bad pronunciation of her father" and to take pride in having "whipped more negroes than any other girl her age (Griffith 29). The reader is left to wonder whether the slave owner or his daughter is more violent and cruel.

Unlike Mary Chesnut whose narrative focuses on exposing how slavery affected the lives of southern women, Mattie Griffith had a different purpose in mind. Written as an abolitionist document her story encompasses a range of incidents. The portrait of Miss Jane is only one example of a southern woman. Aware of the existing social restrictions for an upper-class woman, Miss Jane cannot publicly whip her slaves even if she wishes so. As Ann explains in one instance "had she [Miss Jane] been in the country, [she] would have asked no higher pleasure than to attend to it personally" (Griffith 280). In fact, very early in the novel Ann remarks that even though Miss Jane belonged to one of the prominent and most wealthy families in the neighborhood, there was nothing ladylike in Miss Jane. Cold, harsh and selfish she takes special pride in whipping her slaves. Considered to be the belles of the neighborhood, Miss Jane and her sister fall short of the

ever popular image of a southern belle. Instead of promoting moral virtues and domestic values on their father's plantation, both sisters engage in tormenting their slaves.

Compared to the socially acceptable image of the true woman in the south, the sisters seem even more despicable. With the absolute control that slavery permits them, those two "fine southern ladies" inflict the most violent punishments on their servants: "Acts of diabolic cruelty and wickedness were there perpetrated without the least pang of remorse or regret. Whilst the white portion of the family were revealing in luxury, the slaves were denied the most ordinary necessaries" (Griffith 30). As Minrose Gwin points out, "slavery generates such female monsters, and they are best shown through their relationships with those over whom they exert the most power, yet with whom they should feel the most common bond--black women" (35). Far from adhering to the code of the cult of true womanhood, which demanded purity and morality, Miss Jane and her sister, as depicted by Ann, are in fact evil creatures who take pleasure in abusing their slaves. They are, in Miss Bradly's words, "mean and avaricious enough to desire, for the sake of pecuniary aggrandizement, the enslavement of a race, whom the force of education and hereditary prejudice have taught them to regard as their own property" (Griffith 35).

There were of course other mistresses who were a lot less cruel and controlling and who did try to follow the principles of the cult of true womanhood. As Marli Weiner suggests, "mistresses were deeply influenced by the expectations that white women should treat slaves with kindness and benevolence, thus ameliorating some of the harshness of slavery" (51). Miss Adele Smith and Miss Nellie, the daughters of Ann's later owner Mr. Josiah Smith, differ significantly from Miss Jane and her sister. The two

ladies are “the elite, the cream of the aristocracy” and yet “amiable, and seemingly philanthropic” (Griffith 343). They genuinely care for Ann although they were both born and raised in a pro-slavery conservative family. While they could not change Ann’s situation in slavery, those two white women at least attempted to diminish the effects of slavery. Born in a pro-slavery family they nevertheless could see their slaves and Ann in particular as human beings worthy of a kind word and a smile.

And of course, there is also Miss Nancy, Ann’s last mistress. Benevolent and kind Miss Nancy considers Ann more of a companion that a servant and a slave. It is to Miss Nancy that Ann owes her freedom. Recognizing Ann as a fellow woman, Miss Nancy also tries to help her and her fiancé Henry get married. It is also Miss Nancy who looks after Ann when she gets sick after seeing her mother die on the streets. According to Mattie Griffith, Miss Nancy represents the southern lady—she cares for her slaves and even better, liberates them just as Griffith did in her life. Miss Nancy represents the ideal slaveholding woman who, unlike Mrs. Shelby and Ann’s first mistress Miss Betsy, not only provides for her slaves but sees them as human beings as opposed to mere property. She is much more like a friend than a mistress. As Ann remarks “[h]er life [Miss Nancy’s], as well as her words, was a proof that human nature is not all depraved” (Griffith 379).

In the faces of Miss Betsy, Miss Jane, and Miss Nancy, Mattie Griffith has portrayed the three most common images of the plantation mistress: the kind, yet proslavery oriented mistress, the cruel and vindictive one, and lastly the self-sacrificing and caring southern lady. While Griffith devotes most time and attention to those three mistresses, there are a number of instances in *Autobiography of a Female Slave* which the

narrator mentions several other slaveholding women in order to reveal specific characteristic features of a plantation mistress. In one of those instances, Griffith focuses on the maternal bond that exists between a slave woman and her child, a bond that is unrecognized not only by the planter but by his wife as well. While the wife was playing with her seven months old baby, her husband was whipping a slave mother

> whom he had sold to a trader—lashing her because she refused to go *cheerfully* and leave her infant behind. The poor wretch, as a last resource, fled to her Mistress, and, on her knees, begged her to have her child…What think you was the answer of this white mother? 'Go away, you impudent wretch, you don't deserve to have your child'…this was the answer which, accompanied by a derisive sneer, she gave to the heart-stricken black mother. Thus she felt, spoke, and acted, even whilst caressing her own helpless infant! (Griffith 75)

The mistress was unable to see that a slave woman also had maternal feelings. As a mother herself, the mistress is a position to understand the slave's devotion to her child; yet, as a slaveholding woman, she fails to recognize the slave as a human and sees her only as property, a property that cannot have feelings or experience emotions.

The works of Mattie Griffith and Mary Chesnut devote attention to the elite southern women of antebellum America. Written for different purposes and by authors from different social backgrounds, their writings combine personal experience and social expectations in an attempt to reconstruct life under slavery. They also address the complex relationship between the slaves and the plantation mistresses, a relationship that can be both nurturing and devastating. Trapped between the ideal of a southern lady as

advocated by the cult of true womanhood and the reality in the Big House of the plantation, southern women were often both kind and cruel towards their slaves. Writing for an audience already familiar with the representation of the plantation mistress as presented in slave narratives and slave novels (and more specifically Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Mattie Griffith and Mary Chesnut confirm and yet further complicate the socially accepted images of the southern slaveholding woman.

CONCLUSION

When we begin to research the impact that the institution of slavery had on the slaves, we find a large number of resources available that document their experience under the system. The high number of slave narratives written and published during the rise of the abolitionist movement and the twentieth-century research directed to these narratives have given us detailed information about the lives of slaves and slave holders in the years before the Civil War. However, when one researches how slavery affected *the plantation mistresses*, resources are not as readily available. Few slaveholding women left journals and private papers that accurately reflect their experience under slavery and that provide us with a detailed and comprehensive portrayal of the plantation mistress.

The goal of this project has been to illustrate the repercussions and consequences of slavery on southern women. More importantly, I have sought to address how, seen from diverse perspectives, the plantation mistress exhibits various characteristic features ranging from piety and submission to cruelty and vengeance. Personal diaries, abolitionist tracts, and slave narratives have allowed me to explore how southern women struggled with finding the balance between the slave-holding society's expectations of them and the reality of their lives. Expected to be the upholders of morality, the mistresses found it difficult to adhere to this standard as they witnessed interracial sexual relations between their husbands and fathers and the female slaves. This tension between myth and reality ultimately affected their treatment of the slaves and resulted in violent outbursts on their part caused by jealousy.

Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass were among the first to bring attention to the sexual relationships that existed on the plantations. As former slaves, both writers had first hand experience with life on a southern plantation and therefore they provide the slaves' perspective regarding the mistress. Written in 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* offers glimpses of the characteristics that define southern women in Antebellum America. More specifically, Douglass focuses on the corrupting effect of slavery on both slaves and slaveholders. Sophia Auld stands for any woman (southern or northern) whose gentle and tender nature is transformed under the experience of slavery, a process described earlier in Child's *An Appeal on Behalf of That Class of Americans Called Africans.* Modest and naïve at first, the mistress soon learns how to be a slave holder and adopts the same values as the slave-holding society.

On the other hand, Harriet Jacobs's *Narrative of the Life of a Slave Girl* provides the most detailed and meticulous depiction in literature of the jealous plantation mistress. Building on the characteristics previously suggested by Douglass, Jacobs fully develops the vindictive nature of the mistress regarding the female slaves. Unwilling to acknowledge her husband's immoral behavior, Mrs. Flint turns her rage towards Linda Brent. She exemplifies how brutal and pitiless a mistress can be when her pride is wounded. More importantly, as Brent explains, Mrs. Flint is the perfect example of a mistress who has the power to influence her husband's behavior and to intervene on behalf of her slaves, but who chooses not to do so as she is unable to see the slaves as the true victims of the slave master.

The question of the slave mistress's power is further developed in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* While Mrs. Shelby has no power to prevent her husband from selling their

slaves, Marie St. Claire has that kind of power but does not act upon it. Unlike Mrs. Shelby and Augustine's mother, both of whom represent the ideal plantation mistress, Marie St. Clair is the typical southern belle more interested in her own existence than that of anyone else around her. From the day she was born, she enjoyed the privileges of slavery and does not even for a second question the morality of the system.

Mary Chesnut, on the other hand, often questioned the monstrous effects of the institution and never fully accepted the ideas of the slave-holding society. Though she considered slavery immoral for what it did to southern women with no regard as to the effect it had on the slaves, Chesnut still rebelled against some aspects of slavery while not completely renouncing its benefits. Unlike Chesnut, Mattie Griffith, a former slaveholder, soon realized the evil of slavery and joined the abolitionist movement. In her attempt to support the cause, Griffith wrote *The Autobiography of a Female Slave* which focuses on presenting a gallery of mistresses ranging from the violent Miss Jane to the sweet and compassionate Miss Betsy.

Ultimately, these texts demonstrate that slave mistresses in the antebellum South were compromised as they could not enact the values and the characteristics of the true woman and southern lady as outlined by slaveholding society. The plantation mistress was neither the true victim of slavery nor the absolute perpetrator. Classifying southern women as belonging to either category is not only inaccurate but also a simplified approach towards representing these women. Some southern mistresses, such as Marie St. Claire and Miss Jane, never questioned the morality of slavery and thoughtlessly affirmed the ideas of the patriarchal slaveholding society: they view slaves as property and firmly believed in the institution of slavery. Ironically, as these women reaffirmed the pro-

slavery ideology of the south, they were destined to fail in becoming the ideal southern lady. The more cruelty they exhibited towards their slaves, the less likely they were to embody the four cardinal virtues of the southern lady: piety, purity, domesticity, and compassion.

On the other hand, the mistresses who lived according to the cult of domesticity found it impossible to adhere to it on the plantation. Southern women such as Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Chesnut realized the injustice of slavery and did their best to ameliorate its effects; yet, they also often found themselves powerless to respond to the day-to-day situations on the plantation that regularly included separations of families, severe beatings of slaves, and interracial relations between the master and the female slaves.

Taken together, these six authors provide us with a comprehensive portrayal of the plantation mistress as seen from the perspectives of northern and southern women and former slaves. Their texts present an understanding of the ways in which various characteristics of the mistress are exposed and emphasized according to the writers' view points and the rhetorical and historical contexts at the time of publication. While abolitionist writers and former slaves focus more on the corrupting effect of slavery on the mistress which resulted in her violence and rage, southern women writers provide a justification for the conflicting nature of the mistress as she struggled to maintain her lady-like image while facing the reality of her life.

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VITA

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Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: REPRESENTING THE PLANTATION MISTRESS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Education: Graduated from *Antoine de St. Exupery* French Language High School in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in May 1997. Received the Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Plovdiv in June 2001. Completed the requirements for the Masters of Arts degree at Oklahoma State University in July 2005.

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Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to examine the portrayal of the plantation mistress in southern women's diaries, slave narratives and abolitionist documents. More specifically, this thesis focused on exploring how nineteenth-century literary conventions and societal expectation affect the portrayal of the plantation mistress in antebellum American literature.

Findings and Conclusions: The myth of the southern lady and the cult of true womanhood ultimately influenced the historical or literary representation of the southern woman. The image of the southern white plantation mistress has long been plagued with stereotypes which misrepresent these women and distort their true value and importance in antebellum history. The works of Child, Jacobs, Douglass, Stowe, Griffith and Mary Chesnut devote attention to the lives of elite southern women of antebellum America. Written for different purposes and by authors from different racial and social backgrounds, their writings document both personal experience and social context in an attempt to reconstruct life under slavery. Taken together, these six authors provide us with a comprehensive portrayal of the plantation mistress as seen from the perspectives of northern and southern women and former slaves. Their texts present an understanding of the ways in which various characteristics of the mistress are exposed and emphasized according to the writers' view points and the rhetorical and historical contexts at the time of publication. While abolitionist writers and former slaves focus more on the corrupting effect of slavery on the mistress which resulted in her violence and rage, southern women writers provide a justification for the conflicting nature of the mistress as she struggled to maintain her lady-like image while facing the reality of her life.

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