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Hedrick, Joan D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life:*
Biography Paper

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History 222-A American History to 1865

Professor Mujic

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Harriet Beecher Stowe was an author, philanthropist, and abolitionist. Born on June 14th, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut, Stowe came from a highly religious family that helped to shape her educational and social background. Stowe was the spear head of many groups who rallied for the rights of others. Her strongest attribute was simply her voice. As she built up her credibility in a society where women had little power, she was able to attract many followers. Stowe's life was not an easy one; she often faced hardships and loss in terms of personal tragedies, which were a reoccurring theme in her life. She was the definition of a modern day working mom, having written multiple novels, poems, and journals in order to help support her family of seven children. The hardships that she faced were motivating factors in her career as she was determined to succeed for the sake of her family. This essay will explore the significance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's life with the use of the biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: a life* by Joan D Hedrick along with three primary source letters that further argue her importance in the 19th century as an abolitionist. Her work, both prior to and following the Civil War helped to shape America's history.

The life of Harriet Beecher Stowe spanned 85 years; and she died on May 1st 1896. During her life, she significantly altered the course of American history through her work both as a speaker and writer as made evident through the biography which highlights her many achievements. Without the work that she did, it is possible that slavery would still exist today. Women may not have had the rights that are viewed as common freedoms today that are often overlooked such as the right to vote or the freedom to be an individual while married. Harriet Beecher Stowe worked hard to achieve success in various social issues "at a time when literature was not a particularly respected or lucrative occupation as noted by Hedrick."¹ Her life's

¹ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), viii

significance was particularly important because she did not allow the time period standards to define her.

In 1852, an author and abolitionist, Eliza Cabot Fallon wrote a letter to Stowe in an attempt to learn more about her life. This letter was extremely significant in Stowe's personal evolution because she was generally an extremely private person but in this letter, she opened up to Fallon in a way she never had before. Stowe's son, Charlie, died of cholera, shortly after he was diagnosed by doctors. Stowe, as an abolitionist, wanted to become ingrained in her causes as much as possible and felt as though she could relate to slave mothers in the sense that they both suffered the loss of their children in one way or another. This is an example of Stowe's greatness; she found a way to relate to those it seems she would have nothing in common with. While these losses of children were under different circumstances, they are losses nonetheless. Stowe became aware that "slave parents experienced in extreme form the contradictions of the middle-class parenting, and Hedrick acknowledges Stowe's realization by writing this in her novel."² Stowe was able to recognize this difference and in doing so "tapped the overwrought feelings of white, middle class parents and enlisted their sympathies for slave parents through the powerful metaphors of an evangelical religion shaped by both loss and bondage, writes Hedrick, understanding the importance of Stowe's sympathies."³ In this response to Fallon, Stowe further explained herself writing, "It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her"⁴. The reasoning behind including

² Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 193

³ *Ibid*, 193

⁴ Harriet Beecher, Stowe. *Letter to Garrison from Harriet Beecher Stowe, December 19, 1853*. Letter. International Publishers Co., Inc., New York, 1950, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume II Pre-Civil War Decade 1850-1860*.

Stowe's newfound connection in the biography ties into the fact that Stowe's activism in the abolition of movement increased due to her newfound personal connection with slave mothers.

In addition to advocating for rights for women on a national stage, Stowe also changed the way gender roles were viewed in a typical household. Harriet married her husband, Calvin Stowe, in 1836. Like Stowe, he was any author and educator. Due to his wife's success as a writer and the demand of her job, they did not have the typical marriage for the time period. In the letter to Eliza Cabot Follen, Stowe wrote about the financial aspect of her marriage in a humorous but truthful way. "I was married when I was twenty-five years old to a man rich in Greek and Hebrew, Latin and Arabic, and, alas! rich in nothing else."⁵ Hedrick echo's Stowe's writing by further explaining, "Unlike the male-dominated marriages of the eighteenth century, Calvin and Harriet's union was a "companionate marriage, proving that Stowe was a pioneer in more than one aspect of the women's movement."⁶ The biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: a life* chronicles their union, including the later years of their marriage when Calvin retired and Harriet continued to work, becoming the sole provider for the family, something virtually unheard in the eighteenth century.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's most notable accomplishment was the publication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an anti-slavery book, telling the story of a slave named Tom. Stowe was first introduced to anti-slavery "by her engagements in the free speech movement that sprung up in their defense⁷." Here, Hedrick explores Stowe's cross-discipline impact in the sense that her ploy for freedom of speech lead her down a different path of advocacy. Stowe wrote a letter to a

⁵Harriet Beecher, Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe, to Eliza Cabot Follen, February 16, 1852. Letter. *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 197-204.

⁶ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 122

⁷ *Ibid* 102

man by the name of William Lloyd Garrison, who was a journalist and slave abolitionist. Garrison, like Stowe was looking for a way to better understand slave society. Frederick Douglass, a former slave was valued by Stowe and not Garrison at the time. “There is an abundant room in the antislavery field for him to perform a work without crossing the track of impeding the movement of his old friends, speaking of Garrison.⁸” In this statement, Stowe hoped “in some future time meeting each other from opposite quarters of a victorious field you may yet shake hands together.”⁹ Following the release of her novel, Stowe and Garrison worked together, as pointed out in the biography by Hedrick, in which she goes on to explain their partnership. “In the winter of 1853-1854 she organized, in concert with Garrison, a Boston antislavery lecture series, believing that this was an effective way to cultivate into convictions “the popular impressions... produced by the reading and acting of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹⁰” Stowe’s vision in this situation is what made her so influential. She was able to put together groups to further advance her causes, creating a domino effect with her work.

The reason for Stowe’s writing of this letter is because she admits that she had previously misjudged Douglass and realizes that their views on slavery align more than she has previously thought. According to the biography, prior to her publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe was not much of a political advocate. The importance of this letter is that it links Stowe and Garrison in their views of Douglass. Garrison had formed the New England Non-Resistance Society. The goal of this movement was “supporting women’s right to participate in antislavery politics.¹¹” Naturally, Stowe agreed with the ideas of this group. Women felt as though this group would be

⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Letter to Garrison from Harriet Beecher Stowe, December 19, 1853*. Letter. International Publishers Co., Inc., New York, 1950, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume II Pre-Civil War Decade 1850-1860*.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 252

¹¹ Ibid, 235

beneficial and as Hedrick puts it, “women turned to Stowe for relief from a particular kind of religious scruple that they would not have been able to express to their ministers.¹²” The reason why the biography written by Hedrick is so crucial in understanding Stowe’s life is because it includes the ideas of those who sought guidance and approval from Stowe.

In order to assure that the publication of her novel painted an accurate picture of slavery, Stowe thought it would be best to reach out to Fredrick Douglass who had previously been a slave. She writes to Davis in a letter, requesting his expertise, “I wish to be able to make a picture, which shall be graphic and true in details,” states Stowe.¹³ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was during a time where according to Hedrick, “A true woman would not acknowledge that slaves were stripped down and beaten, that bond-women were the sexual as well as the legal slaves of their masters, that slave masters fathered children of all colors.¹⁴” Through the biography, it is clear that Stowe is the first women make this acknowledgement as Hedrick elaborates that speaking of slavery is a crime in itself, proving that Stowe is breaking not one but two societal norms. In order to prove to Douglass that her goal was to help the slaves, Stowe writes, “Myself and my husband we have lived on the border of a slave state for many years and we have never for years shrunk from the fugitives- we have helped them with all we have to give- I have received the children of liberated slaves into a family school and taught them with my own children.¹⁵” This action by Stowe is significant as it was unheard of for free slaves to be given such adequate care. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: a life* details Stowe’s many interactions with servants and other blacks to further the understanding of Stowe’s action with the race.

¹² Ibid 283

¹³ Harriet Beecher, Stowe. Letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick Douglass, March 8, 1853. Letter. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center Library, 2008.

¹⁴ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 231

¹⁵ Ibid 249

Hedrick poses the question, “How was Harriet Beecher Stowe- the daughter and wife of clergyman- to extend her reach to embrace scenes of oppression and degradation on which her story depended?”¹⁶ Hedrick includes this question in the biography because it poses a dilemma for Stowe. The answer to this question is with the help of a former slave, such as Douglas. As Stowe and Douglass begin to mend their differences on the churches position on slavery, and Douglass realized that Stowe only wanted to help those affected by it, Douglass began to open up to her about his time as a slave working on a cotton plantation and his relationship with his master. Stowe insisted “that the private relations between master and slave be subjected to the scrutiny of public opinion”¹⁷. This in turn, as Hedrick writes, “broke down the ideological barriers between the public and the private sphere, a revolutionary act that had the potential to free white women as well as male and female slaves.”¹⁸ This is considered to be one of Stowe’s greatest accomplishments in the writing of her novel.

The first turning point in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s life was when she was extremely young, unable to comprehend the loss she had experienced. Little did she know, the death of this family member would shape both the personal and professional aspects of her career. Harriet’s mother, Roxana Beecher, died when she was only five years old. Stowe goes on to write about her mother in her novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* referring to her as an angelic figure. In Harriet’s mind, Roxana’s “memory and example had more influence in molding her family, in deterring from evil and exciting to good, than the living presence of many mothers.”¹⁹ Through her many works of literature, Stowe often created “literary mothers,” in which she wrote about them as if

¹⁶ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 219

¹⁷ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 219

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 219

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 16

they were her actual mother. It can be assumed that she attempted to fill the void of growing up without a mother by writing. Hedrick notes these literary mothers and the ways in which her mother's memory was not forgotten due to Harriet's father who tried to make sure she was not forgotten. The loss of her mother at such a young age may have further inspired her in her avocation of women's rights, knowing it would make her mother proud.

As her career continued to blossom, Stowe became obsessed with the idea of perfectionism and attempted to achieve it in every aspect of her life. This obsession took a toll on her, as she drifted away from family and devoted most of her life to her works. On July 1st, 1843, Stowe's brother, George committed suicide. His writings, titled "Views on Christian Perfectionism" later appeared and they revealed that his obsession with becoming the perfect Christian ultimately drove him to his death. "George's death threw Harriet into a final struggle with perfectionism,²⁰" according to Hedrick. Stowe states that "The sudden death of George shook my whole soul like an earthquake"²¹ His death served as a wake-up call for Harriet, from this point on, she began to let go with her obsession to be a perfect Christian and used her brother's death as an inspiration to write. Stowe's biography, written by Hedrick explains that Stowe was normally extremely private. It was important to include this piece as it showed Stowe's growth as a person and writer.

In 1863, Stowe was invited to the Boston Music Hall along with others who had fought for the abolition of slavery. This was during the time of the Emancipation Proclamation was introduced in which according to Hedrick was "the system of laws had created a separate nation within the republic, a nation of people who were declared to have no legal identity, no soul, no

²⁰ Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 152

²¹ *Ibid*, 152

purpose but to work for others, no stake in the republican experiment.²²” The crowd chanted her name, grateful for all she had done for the anti-slavery movement. Stowe, a guarded person and humbled woman accepted praise for the first time, as she “stood up and, with tears in her eyes, silently acknowledged the tribute.²³” This served as a turning point in her career because she finally received the respect and honor she deserved. Hedrick writes about the various awards that Stowe receives and the way that Stowe accepts them. Stowe writes in letters to various family members about the social engagements that went along with her new found fame such as her visit to the White House.

In order to accurately chronical the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, it is only just that a biography was written about her. Stowe had been involved in and became the leader of many groups surrounding the issues of women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. She was considered to be one of the greatest writers of all time. A biography is the best way to chronical not only her life events, but also the many social changes that occurred during the span of her life. The biography allows the letters that she has written to be found in one place with the context of them explained in the writings of her biography.

The writing of this biography was most accurately done so through the inclusion of personal letters that Stowe had written throughout her life. No other Stowe biography includes these letters. Stowe, being the private person that she was did not publicly write about her personal life and these letters provide the insight that was needed to portray Stowe in the best way possible. The only downfall of these personal letters was that Stowe did not date them. According to the biography, Stowe “created enormous work for her biographers by not dating

²² Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 306

²³ *Ibid*, 306

her letters.²⁴ The lack of dates made it extremely difficult to chronicle her life in a timely manner. Another strength of the biography is that it includes much more about Stowe's life other than her publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which most Stowe biographies focus on. It is written in an objective manner allowing the reader to better comprehend Stowe's life.

It is important that the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe be taught because her novel life in general caused a social uproar that awoke America and caused change throughout the nation during the time period of our course in the 19th century. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was widely regarded as a novel that changed the world. Upon meeting President Lincoln at the White House he said to her, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!"²⁵ She was the first woman of this time period to voice her opinion on issues that affected a larger portion of society. She can be seen as one of the most influential people of the 19th century. It is important that everyone knows about her life and contributions to society in order to understand how far the issues of women's rights and slavery have come since her advocacy.

Harriet Beecher Stowe: a life by Joan D Hedrick contains the life work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and her various accomplishments as a result of her advocacy for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. The biography, along with three primary source letters all prove that Stowe was a pioneer of the 19th century. The biography in particular made a strong case for Stowe being one of the greatest women in history. Her significance was explained clearly by Hedrick in a way that highlighted the ways in which Stowe defied 19th century norms.

²⁴Joan D Hedrick. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 366

²⁵ *Ibid*, vi