Violence and the Family in the African-American Antislavery Novel

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Violence and the Family in the African-American Antislavery Novel

by

Kerry L. Linderman

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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by Kerry L. Linderman

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Chair, Graduate Committee

Chair, Department of English
To David,

for your unfailing support
and
constant encouragement—

thank you.
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This thesis provides a detailed analysis of three early African-American literary works: *Clotel*, by William Wells Brown, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs, and *The Garies and Their Friends*, by Frank J. Webb. Specifically, these works are discussed in terms of their representations of violence, especially that stemming from slavery, and the effect of such violence on the family.

An important factor in the devastation caused by the violence of slavery is that system's disruption of the domestic ideal in the homes involved. No matter how well each family may approximate idealized white domesticity of the nineteenth century, the shadow of slavery looms over each home, regardless of the racial identity of its members. This thesis discusses the ways in which violence disrupts the homes in each of the works, from forced separation of family members to invasion of the home itself. In several cases, it is apparent that the limited choices offered to the characters because of their race or gender often contribute to their domestic failures as well.

Furthermore, such vulnerability to violence is not unique to the homes of black characters; although white homes are rarely subjected to the same type of violence as black homes, white characters are, nonetheless, victimized by the slave system as well. Even when slavery is not the main concern nor abolition a central purpose, its inherent violence is far-reaching and inescapable, even for the most successful of white families. Though they differ somewhat in format and purpose, these three works have in common a concern not only for the effects of slavery on the individual, but also for its violent disruption of the home and family, regardless of race or class.
At the climax of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, a desperate mother plunges into the Potomac in a suicidal expression of hopelessness after her failed attempt to escape from slavery and reunite with her daughter:

Her resolution was taken. She clasped her hands convulsively, and raised them, as she at the same time raised her eyes towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion there, which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk for ever beneath the waves of the river!

Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country. (182)

The juxtaposition of Clotel’s helplessness and Jefferson’s power, despite their blood relation, is emblematic of a far greater issue: the essential incompatibility of the white domestic ideal and the black family. If Clotel, who easily passes as white and is the daughter of a president, cannot keep her family intact, there can be no hope for those black families without such “benefits.” In fact, this thesis will argue that the system of slavery and its inherent violence disrupts all families in its reach—despite each family’s racial identity.

Much has been made of the devastating effects of slavery, and its violence, on
the individual, and rightly so, since much of the power of slave narratives and abolitionist literature comes from the authors’ ability to evoke sympathetic responses from white audiences by encouraging them to identify with slaves; Frederick Douglass appeals to our sense of dignity when he describes his defeat of Mr. Covey, and Harriet Beecher Stowe appeals to our parental instincts in her repeated pleas to white mothers. It is no surprise, then, that a great deal of the criticism dealing with the literature of slavery focuses on the authors’ tactics for creating such sympathy, and often particularly on the use of sentimental language and conventions for precisely that purpose. James H. DeVries in particular gives a very thorough analysis of sentimentalism in *The Garies and Their Friends*, following several indicators of that tradition through the course of the novel. Franny Nudelman does the same for *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, although her discussion moves beyond tracing sentimental components to a discussion of the implications of Jacobs’s decision to use such a mode. Both authors see the sentimental tradition as the “appropriate vehicle” for the public to understand the evils of slavery and racism (DeVries 243), and Nudelman adds complexity to the issue by describing Jacobs’s problematic position within it. This thesis seeks to further extend the work of these two authors by scrutinizing the ideals suggested by the sentimental tradition, particularly those of domesticity and gender roles.

In addition, since much of sentimental literature deals with romantic relationships and marriage, closely related to the criticism of sentimentality is that of domesticity and gender roles, or rather the distortion of such constructs. S. Bradley
Shaw, Susan L. Roberson, and Caroline Levander have each provided in-depth discussions of nineteenth-century ideals and their relationship to the literature of slavery, namely, the roles of men and women in the home and the extent to which these ideals are upheld in nineteenth-century literature. Shaw’s work describes a wide variety of contexts for the domestic rhetoric (including antebellum periodicals and abolitionist discourse) that defines the gender roles in these antislavery novels. Roberson continues Shaw’s discussion, focusing more specifically on the paradoxical nature of the cult of domesticity, to which this thesis adds the additional complications that arise for women as a result of the slave system—and in particular, for black women. Even more specifically, Levander’s work describes how motherhood, a role that, according to Roberson, is already problematic, is further complicated for black women by the institution of slavery, a social structure which this thesis will argue disrupts the idealization of white motherhood as well.

Finally, as a subset of the criticism of gender roles, various authors have offered feminist critiques of the authors and characters in the literature of slavery; authors such as Angelyn Mitchell, who discusses Clotel, and Beth Maclay Doriani and Gloria T. Randle, who discuss Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, emphasize the construction of femininity and the extent to which women, black or white, who live in under the system of slavery are capable of upholding the construct assigned to them. Mitchell argues that in Clotel, the female characters fail to live up to the construct largely because they are not fully developed, but are instead mere “symbols of oppression,” since Brown values his abolitionist message above the female slaves he
depicts (11). However, it seems more likely that for Brown, the power of the abolitionist statement lies in the reductive effect it has, not only on women, but on white men as well, since they, too, are portrayed as "types," or symbols of exploitation. Doriani and Randle further address this oversimplification of women's roles in their discussions of the incompatibility of Linda Brent's situation and the ideals of true womanhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The recognition of this incompatibility is one of the foundations of the argument presented here—that slavery disrupts the home through its constant interference with the individual's efforts to live up to society's standards.

Most of the authors of such criticism, because of the nature of their arguments, deal with individual characters and the tension between self and society; however, this thesis will extend their arguments to discussions of the families surrounding such individuals in three novels: William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*. Most slave narratives deal almost exclusively with individual struggle, perhaps because of the permanent severance of family ties, either because family members have been sold away from one another or because of the flight of the individual from the slaveholding South. And since the power of abolitionist literature lies in its historical accuracy—purely fictitious works would certainly not lend urgency to the cause of abolition—these narratives follow suit, often thinly veiling actual events and people under vague place names and aliases. However, behind each story of an individual who is (or is not, as the case may be) successful in his or her quest for freedom is the story of a
family unit sundered by the inherent violence of the slave system. For every escapee, numerous relatives remain, and even those families that are later reconstructed must deal with their past experiences. Furthermore, even families who appear capable of insulating themselves from the effects of slavery, such as white or northern families, ultimately fail to escape all of its violence.

In the three antislavery works to be discussed in this thesis, the violence inherent in the daily lives of black families in antebellum America is exacerbated by the family’s inability to create a domestic refuge that is free of racist violence. This vulnerability reveals two additional sources of violence against and within black families: amalgamation or miscegenation, and tensions within the family caused by efforts to respond to racism. Furthermore, the racial identity of the family has little effect on the success of the home; even families identified as white, if they are in contact with the slave system or its resultant prejudice, are vulnerable to domestic failure. These three novels all deal with miscegenation, amalgamation, and the forced separation of the family, which have an important impact on the relationship between family and violence. Because of the makeup of these families and the relationships among members, the family itself becomes a focal point both in the production of and defense against violence. Clotel, for example, is left with no option but suicide because she is unable to create a sufficiently protective family. As Horatio Green’s mistress, she cannot gain legal protection from the institution of slavery, regardless of her role as the mother of Green’s child, and she and her child are separated. Harriet Jacobs, or Linda Brent, is forced to bargain her “virtue” to a white suitor, Mr. Sands,
in order to escape the wrath of her master's wife. In The Garies, Mr. Walters's home becomes a fortress from which the family counterattacks a lynch mob. There are no intact families in these novels, and their violent fracture has implications not only for members of the black families, but for their white counterparts as well.

For example, in Clotel, William Wells Brown highlights the relationship between violence and femininity by illustrating the ways in which the cohesiveness of the family itself is compromised by the forced separation caused by slavery: Currer is separated from her daughters after living with them as an aristocratic family, and Clotel's eventual suicide is precipitated by her grief after she is stripped of both her freedom and her daughter. While the women in the novel work toward the ideal image of domesticity, their status as potential property interferes with their success. In fact, their fleeting moments of domestic happiness only serve to make their stories more tragic; Althesa's daughters are reduced to slavery after growing up believing they are white, Clotel jumps to her death after attempting to be reunited with her daughter, and Mary, who at least escapes death, must find her happiness as a fugitive. The most successful of the women in the novel is Georgiana Peck, the white woman who succeeds in freeing her slaves. However, this "family," too, is separated, since the newly freed slaves must relocate in Ohio, and Georgiana does not live to enjoy her accomplishment. Although each woman shows an understanding of the myth of domesticity and a desire to attain it, each one fails because she is forced away from the basic ingredients of the antebellum domestic ideal—home and family—by slavery.
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl; by Harriet Jacobs, illustrates a similar
desire and series of attempts to achieve the standard of white domesticity, although
Linda Brent’s higher degree of success creates a somewhat different perspective on
the relationship between violence and femininity. Throughout her quest for freedom
and family, however, Linda/Harriet struggles to maintain the virtuous character
modeled by the idealized white woman while living under a system that precludes
adherence to the same morals and values of those women. In order to avoid the
advances of Dr. Flint, she seeks those of Mr. Sands; in order to maintain a semblance
of virtue by refusing to live in the home Dr. Flint sets aside for her, she must rebel
against the submissive ideal of the domestic white woman. Even after her final
escape, Linda/Harriet is unable to obtain home, family, and virtue simultaneously.
Furthermore, slavery is a determining factor in Brent’s relationships with other
women at different points in her life; while some relationships are portraits of the
nurturing and patient role of women, such as Linda’s relationship with her
grandmother, others (like her relationship with Mrs. Flint) are distorted by jealousy
borne of slavery and miscegenation.

Through the lens of masculinity and violence in Frank J. Webb’s The Garies
and Their Friends, this thesis will further analyze how these issues impede
relationships between women, between men, and even between family members. Of
course, The Garies and Their Friends is significantly different from the other two
novels in the less direct role that slavery plays in the novel and in the northeastern
setting. However, it illustrates, perhaps even more poignantly because of those
differences, the immense effect of America’s racial tensions on the family and specifically, the role of men in the family. Mr. Garie, the slave owner, dies at the hands of an angry mob instigated by Stevens, a distant relative. Mr. Ellis is incapacitated by the same mob, and not only does he lose his status as leader of the household, but he also loses his house itself. Mr. Walters is successful in defending himself and his home, in contrast to the other men, but the family he protects is not his own, and in order to do so, he must transform his home, traditionally the female center of “domestic tranquility,” to a masculinized fortress “manned” by women and children. Although this novel focuses more heavily on the men at the heads of the families, the result is the same: The pressure of prejudice and the need to maintain white standards are too great, and the families are ultimately subjected to violent disruption.

At the core of the problem for each family is the incongruence between the essentially white myths of domesticity and family and the black authors’ representations of the family in antebellum America. As S. Bradley Shaw explains, the classic antebellum image of family life is delineated along gender lines, and the domestic sphere functions in direct contrast to an increasingly aggressive economic public sphere: “While men engaged in the physical, moral, and competitive dangers in the public realm, wives and mothers remained within the home to cultivate a redemptive sanctuary” (75). However, in the early African-American novel, the family is portrayed as being unable to create a “sanctuary” so insulated from “public dangers.” As a result, the American family represents the problems inherent in the
slave system and is fundamentally incapable of achieving the white domestic ideal.

While the families depicted in the three novels differ from one another in several important ways, analysis of their common issues, particularly domesticity and violence, will provide a broader portrait of representations of the vulnerability of the family in antebellum America.
Chapter 2

The Failure of the Domestic Ideal in

William Wells Brown's Clotel

With the forced separation of family as its major theme, William Wells Brown's Clotel highlights the relationship between miscegenation and violence against the black family. For the central family of the novel, Currer and her daughters Clotel and Althesa, the essential struggle is between the approximation of white domesticity, the temporary success of which is directly related to their relationships with white men, and their status as property themselves. Examination of the domestic situations, the homes, of this novel reveals the extent to which the violence against families (or their freedom from it) depends on the success or failure of the domestic ideal for the family involved. For example, while the white Georgiana Peck's adherence to the tenets of domesticity allows her to exert influence over her father and husband and ultimately to effect the release of her slaves (albeit in another state), mulattas Currer, Clotel, and Althesa can only approximate this ideal for a time, and all ultimately fail to create a haven free of the effects of slavery. No black women are depicted as capable of even attempting to imitate white domesticity, and the one black man's home is portrayed as savage and dangerous. In contrast, the white male is defined not according to his home but according to his actions toward the homes of others, and the male slave is portrayed in much the same way, the major difference being his failure to exert much influence at all. What all of Brown's characters have in common is their representative nature: each is meant to illustrate, to varying
degrees, "slavery's greatest atrocity, [which] according to Brown, is the fracture of the enslaved African American's family" (Mitchell 11).

Since the women in *Clotel* are to be analyzed in terms of their adherence to the ideals of white domesticity, Susan Roberson and S. Bradley Shaw's outlines of nineteenth-century beliefs about domesticity and femininity are important to this discussion. Of special interest is each writer's summation of the role of the women within the home and the conflicting attitudes they must face in order to fulfill their widely varied duties. Angelyn Mitchell, however, argues that Brown's women are merely symbolic, each meant to represent a type, not to be judged as individuals. And Adeleke Adéèkó takes the domesticity discussion a step further by discussing true manhood in conjunction with true womanhood, both in terms of their relationship to scientific debates about inherent racial differences. Brown has further differentiated the type of resistance that men and women make against the violence directed toward their families, and M. Giula Fabi's discussion of the modes of rebellion available to each gender—passing for women and action or speech for men—is especially interesting. These analyses have in common a concern for the role of women in the home and in society at large, a concern that is essential to the discussion of the family unit.

This thesis argues that the root cause of the domestic failures in *Clotel* is the inability of the characters to create a safe haven, a home free of the violence of slavery. For Currer and her descendants, Clotel, Althesa, Ellen, and Jane, the vulnerability is largely a result of their relatively ambiguous racial identity: they are
white enough that the domestic ideal seems to be within their reach, but they are too
black for others to let them be successful. Furthermore, they are betrayed, though
with different degrees of intent, by the white men with whom they are involved.
However, the inability of these women to fully attain “white domesticity” is not
entirely a result of their racial identity, since white women are similarly ineffective in
their attempts to create a domestic refuge. Gertrude Green and Georgiana Peck,
though they differ widely in their attitudes toward slaves, are similar in that, despite
their whiteness and their wealth, they do not have homes any freer of the violence of
slavery than the mulatta women. Brown’s point seems to be the insidious nature of
slavery and the system’s disruption of even the most seemingly ideal homes. Finally,
since we may be tempted to attribute such failures to gender restrictions, Brown
includes examples of men, both black and white, who are also unable to keep their
families intact, such as Horatio Green, Reverend Peck, and Picquilo. As with his
female characters, these men have widely varied experiences and motivations, yet
despite such differences, they can be grouped together as examples of male
powerlessness. Furthermore, they are constantly defined in terms of their actions
toward others, particularly the women attempting to approximate the white ideal.

It is, of course, significant that the first home to which we are introduced is
that of Currer, whose liaison with Thomas Jefferson has granted her a certain degree
of success in achieving the standards of white domesticity in that she has her own
home away from the plantation and lives in “comparative luxury” (46). Susan L.
Roberson defines the white feminine ideal according to “the language of advice
manuals for young women of the nineteenth century [which] not only mirrored but engineered an image of women as domestic, dependent, and powerless” (118).

Although the manuals Roberson discusses were clearly intended for the instruction of white women, they have the effect of defining femininity for all women; and by the standards summarized above, Currer is successful in her approximation of white femininity—she does engage in work outside her home, but it entails the very domestic task of doing laundry; she seems independent, implying a certain degree of personal power, because she earns her own money and pays for the upkeep of her home, her children, and herself, yet she is at the mercy of her owner. This highlights an important distinction: while Randle discusses free women, the same principles can be applied to slave women, a major difference being their reduced (but not entirely absent) capacity to choose to adhere to such “advice.” After all, Currer’s dedicated efficiency implies a conscious decision to live up to white ideals. The “buzzwords” of “order, economy, regularity, and industry” are all strictly obeyed in Currer’s home (Roberson 124), and she is intensely concerned about the welfare of her children: “Currer early resolved to bring her daughters up as ladies” (46) and with the aim of attracting men’s attention, so the girls spend their time primping for balls instead of serving a master or mistress. Later events of the novel prove this course of action to be ineffective in providing for her daughters, but in placing such a high priority on their appearances, Currer is actually subscribing wholeheartedly to white principles of domesticity, which portray women as “rather hollow but potentially charming luminaries in the life of men”—essentially, as ornaments (Roberson 129).
Again, Roberson refers specifically to white women, but this emphasis on appearance, and consequently, the status of mere decorations, is what creates the tension between slavery and white domesticity for the nearly white Clotel and Althesa, and it is precisely that tension that leads to their tragic ends. Because they are raised according to white values and expectations, Clotel and Althesa do not have the same level of caution or suspicion for white men as they might if they were raised to view white men as owners rather than suitors. Consequently, when they become involved with Horatio Green and Henry Morton, respectively, the women do not insist on changing their legal status, or that of their children, as stridently as they might, a precaution which may have prevented the deaths of Ellen, Jane, and Clotel, and the exile of Mary. But instead of insisting on the provisions for the well-being of themselves and their children, Clotel and Althesa allow themselves to be idealized and pampered as mere ornaments, and tragedy results.

In fact, our first glimpse of these women is not actually in their home, but as items in an auction notice, their relative values having been derived in large part from their physical appearances, and we learn of this aristocratic lifestyle only through their memories as it is ripped from them. The fact that Currer’s daughters have been fathered by the absent Thomas Jefferson, who does nothing to rescue them or his mistress, further emphasizes their powerlessness, as the relationship to a “founding father” of our country, the very man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, means nothing when it comes to the material value of the slave woman. Furthermore, the fact that Currer and her daughters have lived so long in luxury heightens the tragic
loss of this relative freedom. Thus, although Currer approximates the white domestic ideal for a time, her status as property herself precludes her creation of a complete refuge from the effects of slavery, and her family is forcefully separated as all three women are sold to different masters.

However, Clotel’s situation is significantly different from that of her sister and mother. While Currer and Althea are sold to masters who expect them to be household servants, Clotel is “fortunated” to be sold to her white “suitor,” Horatio Green. But however successful Clotel is in securing the affections of Horatio, his failure to free her, in combination with his wife’s jealousy, ultimately destroys the semblance of security in Clotel’s home and eventually leads to Clotel’s death.

Although Green initially promises Clotel that she “shall soon be free and [her] own mistress” (47), he simply replicates Currer’s situation by providing Clotel with her own home and by fathering her child, Mary. A marriage would not be legally recognized anyway, but Horatio does have the capacity to do more for Clotel and Mary to protect them, namely, to free them. After all, Clotel confesses to Horatio that “if his affections fall from [her],” she “would not . . . hold [him] by a single fetter” (63); yet Horatio does nothing to prevent the literal fetters to which his “wife” and daughter are later subjected.

In the absence of her freedom, Clotel, like Currer, can only approximate the white ideal. Brown constructs Clotel’s character according to the conventional standards outlined by Roberson, but because of her slave status, she cannot fully attain the ideal, emphasizing the incongruence of slavery and domesticity. Brown
places Clotel soundly within the feminine, private sphere by locating her in “a beautiful cottage surrounded by trees so as scarcely to be seen” (62). Like Clotel, this home is judged by its appearance: “It was a perfect model of rural beauty,” just as Clotel is a perfect model of feminine beauty (62). Yet also like Clotel, this home is ineffectual for precisely the same traits that make it “ideal”: it is beautiful and delicate but not safe, always subject to the will of another. The fact that it is hidden, just as Clotel’s race is somewhat disguised by her white appearance, gives it the semblance of security, but the home, like Clotel, is vulnerable. While a home was ideally to be a refuge both for husband and wife, nineteenth-century “advice books often remind woman that although home is her special sphere, home is actually a masculine domain, subject to man’s rule within and without, and a domain in which her presence and selfhood are liable to erasure” (Roberson 122). This is Clotel’s predicament, compounded by the fact that, unlike the white women for whom this advice was written, Clotel does not have the benefit of a legal marriage to bind Horatio to her. Instead, she has “a marriage sanctioned by heaven,” based on their “mutual love” (63), but since it is not legally recognized, Horatio is under no obligation to honor it, and he eventually marries a white woman whose father can give him “great worldly advantages” (64).

Furthermore, Clotel’s femininity prevents her from putting up much of a fight for Horatio, although it would likely have done little good anyway. According to Roberson’s summary of women’s advice manuals, “the truly feminine woman learns to submit gracefully to the advice, rule, whim, and even sullenness of her husband.
While she may influence her husband, even advise him, the domesticated woman knows when to keep silent" (122). Clotel fits this description well, yet there seems to be little reward for it; she “had never complained” about Horatio’s increasing lack of attention to her and Mary (86), and when he admits he is to be married, she “submits” by “begg[ing] him to spare apologies,” although she does refuse his suggestion that she would still be his true “wife” (87). She does not keep silent on the subject of “sharing” Horatio with Gertrude but rather imposes a permanent silence by refusing to see him any longer, even at the risk of arousing his anger. So while Currer’s status change is the result of her master’s death, Clotel’s is precipitated by Horatio’s infidelity to her and by the realization that the “marriage” that is sacred to her is merely an illusion.

Just as with her mother, the tragedy of Clotel’s situation is caused by the incompatibility of her legal status and her personal identity; although she is capable of maintaining the appearance (both in her home and in her person) of white domesticity, this ability cannot save her. She cannot maintain the semblance of the white home, and eventually, she is separated from her child and sold to a new master, who further strips her of some of her feminine beauty—her hair. Interestingly, her long hair is first coded as white: Fellow slave Mill says that Clotel “tinks she white, when she come here wid dat long har of hers” (119). The act of cutting it, then, has the effect of making her “more black” but also less feminine, which later figures into her escape. Once she loses the appearance of the domestic ideal, and consequently, the roles of wife and mother, she also loses some of her stereotypical femininity. It is
her idea to attempt escape from her new home, and in order to do so, she poses as a man.

M. Giula Fabi finds an interesting dichotomy in the modes of slave resistance in Brown's novel, and Clotel's situation addresses both sides. For Fabi, feminine rebellion is passive; it involves the co-opting of white ideals by non-white characters and often takes the form of passing, since it is "consistent with the feminine ideals of passivity and gentility" (Fabi 640). Yet, in her escape, Clotel passes as both white and male, an irony that "points to the limited mobility of white women," since Clotel obviously feels that to travel as a white woman is no safer than traveling as a slave (Fabi 644). However, according to Fabi, male rebellion is open, verbal, and sometimes violent; Clotel's companion, William, actually argues with a railway conductor, who gives in "after a vain effort to get the Negro to pay more" (144). Yet since Clotel has now lost both her home and a portion of her femininity, she too, rebels perhaps more actively than her gender would be expected to, and she returns to Richmond in the hopes of retrieving her daughter and creating a new "home." Far from the meek model of womanhood, she risks, and ultimately loses, her life trying to repair her broken family. Yet unlike Fabi, Brown seems to cast such resistance as feminine: He describes her return to Richmond as "True to a woman's nature, [since] she had risked her own liberty for another" (175). And her death is active in that it occurs in such a symbolic location and during an attempt to escape, yet it is suicidal and ineffectual; symbolic as it may be, it does nothing to change the institution of slavery, and her presidential father, whose residence is "within plain sight," does not
even know of her presence or death in the "deep foamy waters of the Potomac"—the consequence for failing to cross "The Long Bridge" to freedom (182). Brown’s irony is a sharp criticism of an institution that allows a powerful father to entirely ignore the existence of his children because of their race, while in appearance they are as white as he is. Unlike her mother, whose failure to maintain her domestic refuge results in separation and relocation, Clotel’s adds the additional dimensions of resistance and suicide. Essentially, both women "possess all but one feature—the protective male—of full womanhood," and it is the absence of that one feature which causes catastrophe (Adéékó 126).

In contrast, Horatio Green’s legal wife, Gertrude, is more fortunate, since while she cannot command his affections as Clotel does, she exercises much more influence and is therefore more successful in maintaining her own home with Horatio. To begin with, she is described in idealized, exclusively white notions of beauty; in contrast to Clotel’s "long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner" (49), Gertrude’s "light hair fell in silken ringlets down her shoulders, her blue eyes were gentle though inexpressive, and her healthy cheeks were like opening rosebuds" (64). However if, according to Shaw, a woman was to act as a "morally civilizing catalyst" (Shaw 75), then she is a distorted one, as she forces Horatio to choose between his mistress and his wife by threatening to "return to her father’s roof" (118). Furthermore, Gertrude’s influence in her home is generally negative, beginning with this threat to destroy it; she uses her position to ruin the remnants of Clotel’s home, and she treats Mary, the daughter of Clotel and Horatio, with contempt. In fact, in an
effort to discover “what should be done to make [Mary] look like other negroes,”
Gertrude forces Mary to “work, without either bonnet or handkerchief upon her head.
A hot sun poured its broiling rays on the naked face and neck of the girl, until she
sank down in the corner of the garden, and was actually broiled to sleep” (126). All
traces of the child’s “white” beauty gone, Mary becomes simply another slave and is
forced to serve in her own father’s home, mistreated without intervention on his part,
much like Jefferson allowed his “family” to be sold with no interference. Brown
draws attention to the twisted nature of the family, even the white family, under the
influence of slavery by allowing Gertrude to so mistreat Mary that Horatio loses “all
feeling for his child,” at which point, “Mrs. Green’s own heart became touched for the
offspring of her husband, and she became its friend” (186). Mary, then, is constantly
deprived of at least one parent: of a father when she is with Clotel, of a mother when
Clotel is sold, and again of a father when Gertrude successfully breaks Horatio’s
familial bond with the girl. This influence over her husband is not quite the “moral
influence” suggested by the domestic ideal, and Gertrude, although white, is never
portrayed as a fully successful wife or mother; she does not have the complete
affection of her husband, nor is she portrayed as a nurturing mother—she never
appears to have children of her own. In fact, her warped “family” is further fractured
by Mary’s escape, finally creating in Gertrude yet another failure, to achieve the ideal
home.

However, it is unfair to place the blame entirely on Gertrude, since Horatio
Green’s own behavior is largely responsible for the breakdown of his family. Unlike
the women in the novel, Horatio and other men are defined in terms of their impact on other homes. He is the “rescuer” when Currer’s family is broken up, since he partially preserves Clotel’s domestic situation, and then he becomes Gertrude’s suitor, but not simply because of affection for Gertrude but because of his relationship to another man, her father, during “His visits to the house [that] were at first purely of a political nature” (64). Thus, Brown defines Horatio in stereotypically “male” terms, constantly in the public sphere. Ironically, however, both women with which Horatio is involved have political connections—and Clotel’s have the potential to be much more powerful, as her father is president; yet the possibility for Horatio to use this connection for advancement is nullified by Clotel’s slave status, and he chooses Gertrude, the daughter of a lesser politician, instead. In addition, Horatio’s own lack of self-control precludes his success in establishing and maintaining the “domestic refuge”; he is constantly away, even almost immediately after placing Clotel in her fragile, “sheltered home in Horatio’s heart” (63). He is “absent day and night with his friends in the city, and the edicts of society had built up a wall of separation between the quadroon and them” (63); in other words, while at first it seems he has created for Clotel a safe and happy home, he quickly abandons her for public life “in the city,” which then leads to his marriage.

Robert S. Levine points out another problem with Horatio’s impact on Clotel’s home: he sees in Horatio an “intemperate master,” one who is both “drunk with power” (thus the marriage to Gertrude for political gain) and literally drunk—and therefore a negative impact on the home (“Whiskey, Blacking, and All”? 98).
Instead of dealing with the problem he has created through his “thirst” for power, Horatio “was trying to find relief in that insidious enemy of man, the intoxicating cup” (118). Brown deliberately connects his alcoholism to his ineffectiveness in protecting his family when Gertrude, “as if to make her husband drink of the cup of humiliation to its very dregs,” forces Horatio to sell Clotel and make Mary a slave in his own home (118)—which happens as a direct result of another excursion away from his home, when he takes Gertrude past Clotel’s home. And later, when Clotel’s escape from slavery and attempt to retrieve her daughter allow for the possibility of her home being re-established, “Horatio Green was not in Richmond” (186) and therefore is unable to repair any of the damage his intemperance has done, including Clotel’s arrest and death. Thus, Brown’s decision to locate Horatio perpetually outside his home suggests that his real importance in the private sphere is in his effect on others and not on his own home, in which Gertrude seems to have the most influence. This would suggest yet another instance in which Gertrude does not live up to the domestic ideal—although this time it seems to be to her advantage, since contrary to the warnings of the nineteenth-century advice manuals, it is Horatio whose “presence . . . [is] liable to erasure” (Roberson 122). It is, however, shortsighted to blame Green’s ineffectiveness solely on his intemperance, as Levine does, unless the context for his “intemperance” is extended beyond merely that of alcohol. Green’s “intemperance” in his dealings with women and in his political ambition, is significant, too, since it is his decision to marry Gertrude for political gain that destroys the family life he had created with Clotel.
The homes addressed to this point have obvious obstacles to success: Currer and Clotel are both slaves involved with men who, because of societal pressures and personal ambitions, cannot (or rather, will not) protect them or their families. Brown’s intention is clear: to show how the institution of slavery severs the bonds between father and child because of racial identity, mother and child because of physical separation, and “husband” and “wife” because of political ambition. However, Brown does not simply see slavery as the enemy of the amalgamated family; his portrayal of the Peck family shows that slavery is so disruptive a force that even the most ideal domestic situation cannot overcome its influence.

In contrast to both Horatio’s intemperance and Gertrude’s distortion of familial bonds, Georgiana Peck does achieve the ideal domestic refuge, with the important exception of producing offspring. However, her “children” are her slaves and her legacy is their freedom—freedom purchased through her success with the domestic ideal. Interestingly, Georgiana does this by influencing the men in her home, her father and husband, on the very public matter of slavery while maintaining the domestic, private ideal. However, her location within the private sphere does not prohibit her understanding of the slave system. In fact, she seems to recognize, even better than the men, the economics behind slavery, especially the idea that the slaves’ value as property and not an inherent lack of value as humans is what motivates their continued oppression (Adéékó 123): “Let us not deceive ourselves into the idea that slavery is right, because it is profitable to us,” she instructs Carlton (93).

Georgiana’s primary source of influence, however, is through religion,
although ironically, her father is the preacher. Nevertheless, “supposedly by nature more religious and pious than man, woman was called on the Christianize and humanize those within her domestic circle” (Roberson 134), a task at which Georgiana is ultimately successful. Her simple, gentle, and anti-slavery interpretations of Biblical scripture are in stark contrast to her father and Snyder’s pro-slavery interpretations, which emphasizes Brown’s belief in the hypocritical nature of Christianity in America. According to Rennie Simson, “Passages of the Bible were quoted out of context and completely misinterpreted to soothe the gnawing consciences of large numbers of men greedy for money and power” (11), and Peck and Snyder are prime examples of this. Snyder actually preaches that the Biblical text, “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them,” is an admonition to the slaves to behave as they would want their slaves to behave if they were masters, since God “requires this of [them], and will reward [them] well for it” (74-75). This also suggests that in Brown’s eyes, true Christianity is preserved in the home; it is significant that Georgiana’s religious arguments against slavery are closely connected to her personal relationship to Carlton:

The young Christian felt that she would not be living up to that faith that she professed and believed in, if she did not exert herself to the utmost to save the thoughtless man from his downward career; and in this she succeeded to her most sanguine expectations. She not only converted him, but in placing the Scriptures before him in their true
light, she redeemed those sacred writings from the charge of
supporting the system of slavery, which her father had cast upon them
in the discussion some days before. (93)

Thus, Georgiana “saves” both Carlton and Christianity itself through her careful and
patient explanations, and such discussions occur in the privacy of her home. In
contrast, the misinterpretations are used as sermons for the slaves, whose services
take place on the plantation, the “public,” business-related area, but not within
Georgiana’s “private” realm.

Even when Georgiana takes on the more public role of liberator, she does so
from within her home and using traditionally female influences. Unlike the
intemperate Horatio Green, who is ultimately unable to save Clotel and Mary from
slavery, Georgiana promotes temperance as a means of gradually freeing her slaves
and making them positive examples of their race (Levine, “‘Whiskey, Blacking, and
All’” 100). Once she advises the ninety-eight slaves of her intention to free them after
each has accumulated a sum of money with which to establish themselves in Ohio,
“They became temperate, moral, religious, setting an example of innocent,
unoffending lives to the world around them, which was seen and admired by all”
(133). Furthermore, when Georgiana and Carlton also take on the religious
instruction of the slaves, “the very great attention paid by the slaves showed plainly
that they appreciated the gospel when given to them in its purity” (135), yet another
example of Georgiana’s moral influence. Finally, the realization of her promise to
free the slaves is also an intensely private affair, since it occurs at Georgiana’s
deathbed. Unlike the men in the novel, she does not place the responsibility for such an important act in anyone else’s hands, even Carlton’s, although “she had confidence in her husband that he would carry out her wishes in freeing the Negroes after her death” (154). Instead, she sees to this task herself, even though she is “pale, feeble, emaciated, with death stamped upon her countenance” (155). It is as though someone must pay for the slaves’ freedom; since they are not being subjected to the usual painful separation of their own families, Georgiana must take on the suffering instead: “Brown’s diction reflects the sense of a sentimental exchange between spirit and flesh, whereby the moral efforts of liberation extract an equal and opposite mortality from the body of the white heroine” (Bentley 506). So even Georgiana, who has succeeded not only in creating a domestic refuge but also in influencing the traditionally male public sphere, cannot enjoy a family totally free of violence, since even if she lived, her “children” are forced to move away in order to escape the evils of slavery. Nonetheless, Georgiana does what no white man in the novel does—she protects her “children” from future slavery.

As with Horatio Green, the men at the Peck plantation seem not to display much influence over their own homes, but instead are defined largely in terms of their effects on others. For example, Carlton is not even in his own home—he is visiting from the North; however, he does wield a degree of influence in marrying Georgiana, as he becomes master of the plantation. In doing so, he protects Georgiana’s home from relatives who might interfere with Georgiana’s wish to liberate the slaves, most notably, her uncle, “a tight-fisted yankee” (129). However, once he makes
Georgiana’s home is his own, Carlton does little to influence any of the events there; he goes along with Georgiana’s plan to free the slaves she inherits from her father, and the entire basis of his beliefs on the subject of slavery comes from Georgiana’s influence in the first place.

Reverend Peck is similarly ineffectual within his own home; his arguments with his daughter take place within the home, and he never succeeds in convincing her—or Carlton, for that matter. Peck’s influence is most visible in the public domain; when approached by an agent for Althesa about purchasing her mother, he refuses to sell Currer and therefore has a negative impact on the home of Morton and Althesa, denying the girl an opportunity to partially reconstruct her family. All of the other incidents in which Brown depicts Peck deal with slavery and its impact on the black family as well: His proslavery interpretations of the Bible are passed on to his “large congregation” (69), which in turn affects the slaves whose masters now have Biblical support for oppressing them, and he shows anxiety and a desire to “change the conversation to something else” at Georgiana’s mention of using dogs to hunt down his slave, Harry, which had resulted in the man’s death and, obviously, the violent fracture of the slave’s family (112). When it comes to influencing his own family, however, Peck is not the one to orchestrate the marriage between his daughter and his friend—Georgiana is. Peck does use “every inducement in his power to prolong his stay” (121), but Georgiana is the one to let Carlton know “that she was ready to become his wife” (130). It is interesting to consider what would likely have happened to Georgiana were she not white; her father, like the other white men in the
novel, takes a step toward providing a safe refuge for her, but he does not complete a lasting and valid provision for her. It is only Georgiana’s status as a white woman that prevents her removal from her home, and it is her forethought that allows her to plan a marriage to an agreeable man instead of allowing her property to be divided up by relatives. Once again, Brown portrays in Peck the image of the white male who lacks influence in his own home and whose main purpose appears to lie outside his own domestic sphere.

The black male, too, is ineffectual as regards the domestic setting, yet Brown does not compensate as he does for the white male, by giving him the power to affect others. Instead, the black male is portrayed predominantly in terms of resistance, but in various degrees of violence. Regardless of the degree or type of resistance, however, Brown’s black men share a much more overtly violent world, so for them, the idea of the home is even more hopeless: “the leading role for the black male body . . . is as the victim of horrific violence” (Bentley 515). Many of the anecdotes Brown includes in the novel support this characterization of the black male; for example, “The Negro Chase” describes in detail the process of using dogs to hunt the escaped black male, and in an article from the Free Trader, Brown shows the result: “The body was taken and chained to a tree immediately . . .” and a fire lit, after which the slave, “surging with superhuman strength,” escapes again but is shot and burned completely (60). Such is the consequence of an attempt to flee an unsafe home; another example follows immediately, when Brown gives an account of the “runaway’s den” being discovered, at which “the inmates took alarm, and made their
escape” but were caught by the slave hunters and dogs (61). This was an established home, having existed “for several months so artfully concealed under the ground” and fully stocked with “a quantity of meal, bacon, corn, potatoes, &c. and various cooking utensils and wearing apparel” (61). So while the examples of escaped slaves illustrate the extent to which they do not have a safe home to begin with, this anecdote highlights the inability to maintain and protect such a home even when escape is successful. However, to characterize the black men of the novel as victims of violence based on such anecdotes is to ignore their focus on resistance to the slave system; the men who are victimized are those who interfere with white authority. After all, the black men on the Peck plantation escape violence because Georgiana intercedes for them—they are freed instead of harmed.

Furthermore, Bentley’s description ignores a significant anecdote of black male resistance—that of Picquilo, a “large, tall, full-blooded negro, with a stern and savage countenance” (177). His is a very different sort of home, one that by its very existence represents a threat to white power, since he and his wife are runaways. But Brown “tempers his cultural inversion by making Peculiar a classic barbarian whose un-American vengeful manners reveal a residual savagery, hence his portrayal as foreign” (Adéékó 128): “the marks on his face showed that he was from one of the barbarous tribes in Africa, and claimed that country as his native land” (177). His active resistance to the whites emphasizes the white fear of “invasion” by the black man, represented by the hysteria produced over the Nat Turner rebellion. Whereas white men profit from the fragmentation of the black home, black men have no means
of exerting power over the white home, except through the threat of open rebellion. This slave, who lives in a home independent of white rule, represents a serious threat to the domination of the whites in that he is secretive, independent, and fiercely protective of his territory: "He was a bold, turbulent spirit; and from revenge imbrued his hands in the blood of all the whites he could meet" (177). He also refuses to recognize white society, one example of which is his relationship to his "wife," a woman with whom he cohabits "after the fashion of his native land" (177), not in the whitened, Christianized version of marriage. But unlike the other black males who resist in the novel, Picquilo's fate is ambiguous. Brown never shows his home being invaded by white men as he does with the other runaways; he simply says that the resisting slaves "were subdued, except a few in the swamps," where Picquilo makes his home, and that "bloodhounds were put in this dismal place to hunt out the remaining revolters" (179). It is reasonable to assume that Picquilo, too, is "hunted out," but Brown chooses not to punish his savagery against the white oppressors with graphic violence against his swampy home, perhaps a bit of resistance on Brown's part.

Although Brown depicts in Picquilo an example of one who rejects white social traditions, he does not imply that adherence to such traditions guarantee any type of protection from violence against the home; even the home of Morton and Althesa, who in nearly every way resemble the ideal white family, is victimized by the institution of slavery. Morton purchases, then marries Althesa, and attempts to help her repair her broken family by offering to purchase Currer. Although the Mortons
fail in this attempt, they do succeed in living the “ideal, white” life; in fact, “the good and generous Althesa” is able to help free Salome Miller, a white woman sold into slavery, a feat Althesa could not accomplish if she were not considered white (116).

Althesa and Henry have two daughters, and the family lives so soundly within the sphere of white domesticity that these daughters are not even aware of their slave ancestry. It is not until the deaths of their parents that they are told of their status as slaves, their mother never having been actually freed and her marriage to Morton one “which the law did not recognize; and therefore she whom he thought to be his wife was, in fact, nothing more than his slave” (170). Once again, the white male’s failure to fully comprehend the situation of the mulatta leads to her inability to achieve complete success in creating in her home a refuge from slavery’s evils.

Highlighting the instability of the home, Brown portrays Althesa’s daughters as the victims of an ancestry of which they are entirely ignorant. They are separated and sold as a result of the (white male) creditors’ greed, and not even Morton’s brother, who is willing to auction his farm, is able to subvert the power of the institution of slavery. Like Clotel and their mother before them, the girls stand “trembling, blushing, and weeping; compelled to listen to the grossest language, and shrinking from the rude hands that examined the graceful proportions of their beautiful frames” (171). Home, for both girls, becomes nightmarish—they endure separation from one another and must face the intentions of their purchasers. Ellen poisons herself almost immediately after discovering “for what purpose she had been bought” and fully understanding “how great was her degradation,” and dies in her
new home (172); Jane hopes for freedom through her “enthusiastic lover” (174) but instead sees him shot outside her window at her home, after which she dies of a broken heart. Both of these new homes, then, are places of violence—one suicidal and one homicidal. And neither girl even attempts to create for herself the type of safe haven that their mother did, false as Althesa’s turns out to be.

Mary is the one descendent of Currer’s family to succeed in escaping completely from slavery; however, she cannot do it in the United States. Like her mother and grandmother, Mary trades on her “white” beauty and catches the interest of a white man, but although he does marry her, his interest in her is first as a reminder of his sister: He tells her that he “had an only sister . . . Who died three years ago in France,” and that “The love . . . which [he] had for [his] sister is transferred” to Mary (202), which removes the sexuality of Currer’s and Clotel’s situations from Mary’s experience. Also unlike her forbears, Mary meets this man under circumstances which she has created. She is sold out of state by her master/father after helping to secure George’s escape, and she meets Devenant aboard a steamer. True, her marriage to him is partially forced on her by her desperation to secure total escape, but whereas Currer and Clotel are purchased as property by their lovers/masters, Mary actually rejects Devenant’s advances at first out of suspicion: “I had all along suspected that the man was a knave, and this profession of love confirmed me in my former belief, and I turned away and left him” (202). And when she does leave for France with him, it is not as his property, since although he had offered to purchase her, he instead ran off with her—instead, they are co-conspirators
in her escape. In fact, he is the one to suggest flight, and he promises “before high heaven that [he] will marry [her] as soon as it can be done” (203). In fulfilling this promise, Devenant avoids categorization as simply another white man who fails to provide actual refuge for slave women. However, while Mary does succeed in creating a safe haven for herself, her husband dies, and her home is once again broken. But since she is no longer in America, Brown can allow Mary to remain free and prosperous; she lives with her father-in-law until we find her at the end of the novel not in her home, but in a graveyard, where she once again meets George. Her ultimate marriage to George differentiates Mary from her mother and other female relatives in that she is now free to pursue the domestic ideal without the dark cloud of slavery hanging over her. Nevertheless, such happiness comes at the expense of being able to live in America, the very fate Georgiana sought to avoid for her slaves. However, given the life they would have in America, with no living relatives, and fraught with danger and the ever-present possibility of being recaptured and sold, it seems highly unlikely that Mary and George will see the “price” of their freedom as any sacrifice at all.

While imperfect because of the necessity of relocation, Mary’s life stands in direct contrast to her mother’s. Mary has her freedom, a legally recognized marriage, and a family around her, while Clotel dies an escaped slave trying to reunite her broken family, and having been put in such a position by white men who fail to protect her—both her father, Thomas Jefferson, and her “husband,” Horatio Green.

This contrast highlights the tenuous nature of the slave woman’s life in America, an
ambiguous existence represented in no character better than that of Clotel. She is, in appearance, white, but she is coded as black because her lineage is not purely white. Apparently, her father's status as President does nothing to ameliorate her situation; in fact, it is because she is so white that her value as a slave is so high. Because she possesses "white" beauty, she attracts a white lover, but because she is not seen by others as white, she cannot keep him or his protection. Because she is raised according to white standards, she strives to duplicate white domesticity, but because she is not "entirely white," the white domestic ideal is, ultimately, inaccessible to her. Finally, because she looks white, the daughter she bears to Horatio looks even whiter, but because others see Clotel as black, her daughter is subjected to the same fate as she is—a life of slavery—and only because Mary leaves the country does she escape this cycle. For Brown, then, the character of Clotel embodies the most important issue that the families of his novel face: the failure of white domesticity and the resulting lack of protection for the characters involved.
Chapter 3

*Linda Brent's Search for Home and Family in Harriet Jacobs's*

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

William Wells Brown provides in *Clotel* a variety of permutations of the same theme: that slavery prevents black families, and in fact white families as well, from being successful in the traditional sense, as defined by the nineteenth-century domestic ideal. To illustrate his point, he portrays numerous failed homes, ranging from one with a president at its source to one in a swamp, identified as almost foreign. Harriet Jacobs, in her autobiographical "novel," since she relies wholly on her own experiences, has but one family to depict—her own. However, in recounting her *Incidents*, she too provides several examples of domestic failure, and it is significant to note that of the four main domestic situations in her tale, none actually belongs to her. This is a strong signal that, while her story seems to be in the familiar vein of the slave narrative, with the focus on the struggle for freedom and equality, Jacobs is ultimately concerned with the search for a true home. And, like the homes in the preceding discussion of *Clotel*, those that Jacobs presents are similarly failures in terms of the myth of domesticity.

In order to show how the violence of slavery affects the family in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, this discussion will examine the major "homes" Jacobs presents: those of her childhood, her parents', grandmother's, and first mistress's homes; those of her adolescence, the Flint home and again her grandmother's home; and those of her adulthood, her garret hideaway and the Bruce home. Obviously, each
differs in numerous ways, but what each has in common is Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent's inability to create a safe domestic refuge of her own: for herself and for her family. In part, this failure results from the inability of her own family: to protect her; her father does not wield the sort of authority over his family the way a white man might and is unable, rather than unwilling, to free his children. And her grandmother's protection is uneven at best; she cannot keep Linda from the Flints' service, but she is an accomplice in Linda's later deception of her owners. Likewise, the men who have the power to help her create a home are, in fact, obstacles to her success—Dr. Flint actively tries to steer her from the "white" morality in which Linda's grandmother raised her, and in response, she turns from it on her own through her decision to take a white lover, Mr. Sands. The problems Dr. Flint causes her, and Linda's reactions to those problems, are enormous factors in her later decisions: she bears two children to Mr. Sands in order to avoid Dr. Flint, which complicates her later escape by creating an attachment to the very area which she wishes to flee. Consequently, she mothers her children vicariously, so that when she is in a position to be a "real" mother to them, her family is already disrupted beyond repair, and she soothes her maternal instinct by "mothering" another woman's child. In this way, Linda completes a cycle of domestic failure through her responses to the various homes in which she lives.

Most criticism of this novel focuses on whether or not Jacobs upholds the cult of true womanhood, or whether she subverts it. Does she speak in sentimental terms in order to appeal to her audience of white women, or simply because her story
adheres to that style of narration? Beth Maclay Doriani, for example, sees her as “defiant and aggressive” in her exhortations that she not be judged by white standards (209), while Franny Nudelman focuses instead on Jacobs’s unique ability to discuss the “interrelatedness” between the “a domestic ideology that relies on female sexual purity and an abolitionist discourse that insistently publicizes the sexual victimization of slave women” (942). In essence, the criticism deals with how much she actually regrets her failure to live up to the sexual standards of the white women of her time, whether she begs for understanding because she feels shame or because she knows her audience expects her to be ashamed. Still others, such as Anne B. Dalton, focus on the gap between Jacobs’s stated purpose—to tell “the whole truth” about her life, including the abuse she suffered—and the distinct absence of explicit details, again with the theory that Jacobs seeks to fit her narrative within sentimental discourse, precluding such blunt honesty. While all of these issues are, of course, related to the issue of the ability of the households depicted in Incidents to uphold the domestic ideal, most of these discussions center on how Jacobs tells her story, while this discussion must be based instead on what she tells us.

What Jacobs tells us to begin with is that, during her childhood, Linda Brent is unaware of the fact that she is a slave, a state of ignorance produced partly by her age and partly by her home situation, so it is this situation with which we should begin to discuss slavery’s violent effects. She describes her parents’ home as “comfortable,” so nurturing that she “was so fondly shielded that [she] never dreamed [she] was a piece of valuable merchandise, trusted to them for safekeeping, and liable to be
demanded of them at any moment” (5). Linda’s father is a skilled carpenter, one capable of supporting his family through his work outside the home (5), so in this sense, he upholds the masculine and fatherly ideal; however, his ability to “manage his own affairs” is dependent on his agreement to pay his mistress yearly for this privilege, which identifies him as her property. Furthermore, while he works diligently enough to amass the funds necessary to purchase his children’s freedom, “he never succeeded” in doing so (5). Therefore, while Linda’s father outwardly appears to be the independent head of his family, slavery deprives him of control of his offspring and of his earned wages.

Similarly, Linda’s grandmother is an industrious woman, depicted in very domestic terms, with her particular skills listed as nursing, sewing, and baking (6). Like Brown’s Currer, she is allowed to “work outside the home,” which is unusual for a woman; however, also like Currer, this work is an extension of her domestic duties, baking, and the goal of such work is the well-being of her household—Linda’s grandmother is permitted to sell her goods “provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits” (6). Although even with this stipulation, “the business proved profitable,” but Aunt Martha is, like Linda’s father, unable to use the money for its intended purpose—the purchase of her children (6). In part, this is because of the economics of slavery in that her son Benjamin is sold “in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents,” and in part, it is because of the attitude of the slave owner toward the slave: her mistress’s promise to repay the three hundred dollar loan is not honored, and a large portion of her savings is thus lost (6).
In addition, this home does not even really represent physical safety from the outside world, since it is vulnerable to invasion by a white militia after the Nat Turner rebellion. While relative to other homes, Aunt Martha’s is somewhat protected, this protection comes from white neighbors, including the “white gentleman who was friendly” to Linda and Aunt Martha, who must physically enter the home to offer aid—a different sort of “invasion,” but nonetheless a foreign white presence in the household (64). So Aunt Martha’s home is, because of its vulnerability to outside forces, no domestic sanctuary, and while Linda and her brother enjoy comfort and food in their grandmother’s home for a short time, this home is later also a source of Linda’s unhappiness, forcing it even further from the realm of the ideal.

However, before Aunt Martha becomes an active agent in Linda’s distress, Linda experiences another, though short-lived, seemingly happy home; after the death of her mother, at which point she “learned, from the talk around [her], that [she] was a slave,” she goes to live with her mother’s mistress, a woman whom she comes to see as “almost like a mother” to her (7). But “What maternal nurturing Brent subsequently receives, however, inevitably prefigures the mothering that she later gives: fragmented and inadequate” (Randle 44), even from so competent a mistress. This “foster sister” of her mother creates the illusion of the domestic ideal, and Jacobs portrays in her home a stereotypically domestic scene:

My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a
heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child. When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days—too happy to last. (7)

Here we have Linda the child contentedly learning to sew under the tutelage of a concerned teacher, who cares enough about her well-being to allow her time to run and play. However, it is important to note the tension between Linda’s heart “free from care” and the fact that she “labors” for hours at a time. Also, when Linda does run out to play, it is with industry—the flowers she gathers are not for herself but for her mistress’s enjoyment. A similar tension arises from inspection of this mistress’s other role, that of educator. While Linda acknowledges her good fortune in having a mistress who taught her to read, a skill that is of abundant use to her later, she notes with some chagrin another aspect of her education. This mistress engages, like Georgiana Peck, in religious instruction, though unlike Georgiana, she does not herself honor her religious teachings. Instead, she fails to uphold her promise that the children of her former slave, Linda’s mother, should “never suffer for anything” (7) and bequeaths Linda to her niece. For Linda, this is a source of disillusionment, since according to Caroline Levander, “Linda believes that maternity, regardless of its source, inevitably works toward the well-being—and therefore the freedom—of those it nurtures” (30). And it is reasonable that she should believe this, after living happily with a nurturing “foster sister” of her mother and after witnessing her grandmother’s industrious efforts to free her own children. Furthermore, if any southern woman in
the novel approaches the domestic ideal, it is this one, yet even she fails to provide refuge for her "foster daughter" or to uphold her role as religious instructor. While the lesson Linda learns from this experience is a bitter one, if what Levander says is true, perhaps it explains the extraordinary lengths she goes to later on in order to free her own children.

Thus far, this discussion has focused on Linda's childhood homes, led by a variety of adults—her father, her grandmother, and her mistress—all of whom were unable (or unwilling) to create for her a "home" in the nineteenth-century sense of the "domestic refuge." The violence each of these homes experiences is indirect or relatively mild, from the separation of relatives to disruptive intrusions; however, in the households in which Linda resides around her adolescence, the violence she experiences is direct, it is personal, and it comes from several sources. One obvious source of violence is Dr. Flint; less obvious, but just as destructive sources are Mrs. Flint and Linda's grandmother, women from whom Linda feels she should be able to seek sympathy and compassion but who fail to provide the nurturing she needs.

Linda's experience at the Flint home is unpleasant from the start. First of all, she is still stinging from the betrayal by her former mistress; and second, the environment itself seems very uninviting: She says that she and her brother encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment" immediately upon arrival and that she felt "so desolate and alone" that night on her "narrow bed" (9). She also notes, "I was indebted to her (Aunt Martha) for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal" (11), since "Little attention was paid to the slaves' meals in Dr. Flint's
house” (10) and her “scanty wardrobe” was provided almost exclusively by her grandmother (11).

In addition to this home’s physical lack of comfort is the moral discomfort which awaits Linda there. Dr. Flint, the villain of the narrative, makes life unbearable for her there. Jacobs describes Flint in terms of almost Biblical evil, saying that his “restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour” (18). Later, she writes rather vaguely of the sexual abuse she suffers,

My master began to whisper foul words in my ear . . . He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? (27)

As noted earlier, this section of Linda’s story is perhaps the most-often debated, both because of her sentimental mode of narration and her tendency toward vagueness in her descriptions of the abuse she suffers. However, what is most pertinent to this discussion is not Jacobs’s narratorial decision but what the events of this portion of her story mean in terms of domesticity. The passage above indicates, though obliquely, several elements of abuse. First, Linda is subjected to psychological abuse, the constant reminder that she is but an object to Flint, and the knowledge that she has
no recourse to end her suffering. Second, she endures verbal abuse, as Flint attempts to seduce her and destroy her moral foundation. This is important not only because it may convince her to behave immorally out of compulsion but also because it carries the possibility that she may consent to such behavior, a phenomenon that is, according to Portelli, just as important to Flint as it would be damaging to Linda. In discussing sexual victimization, she writes,

Consent is also necessary—that of the ruled, of course, but also, more secretly and deeply, that of the rulers themselves. The slaves' consent is needed both as a prevention of rebellion and as a cure for the masters' guilt, which is the foundation of the master' “consent” to themselves. Thus, Harriet Jacobs's master, wishing to possess her sexually, is not satisfied with forcing her but must attempt to seduce her. Beyond the specific sexual aspect, seduction is a metaphor for the masters' wish to believe that the slaves will do by consent what they could be forced to do by coercion. (80)

Paradoxically, Portelli's comment implies that the victim derives a modicum of power by denying the consent that the master so fervently desires.

Finally, Jacobs's descriptions of Flint's behavior are a roundabout portrayal of actual, physical, sexual abuse, since as Anne B. Dalton notes, “In parables and folklore, the ear has traditionally been one site of the virginal woman’s molestation and impregnation, as with the Christian Mary figure. . . Her representation of the ear as the site of sexual assault is also evocative of how a verbal attack can feel like a
physical blow” (42-43).

As unbearable as life in this home is for Linda because of such abuse, another option available to her seems far worse: “In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town” (53). This situation recalls that of Clotel, hidden away in her cottage, with the important difference in the women’s respective feelings toward the men who own the property. And while both women are to be hidden from jealous mistresses, Linda’s proximity to Mrs. Flint and indeed to the public while in the Flint home is what prevents her abuse from being even more severe. Thus, while Clotel’s cottage is a place of happiness for her and escape for Horatio, Linda’s house would be but an instrument of further abuse on the part of Flint.

So while Dr. Flint is by far the most disruptive force in Linda’s search for domestic happiness, his actions cause Mrs. Flint to stray from the ideal as well. His disrespect for his marriage so tarnishes their home that Mrs. Flint is unable to adhere to the behavior dictated by true womanhood, and she becomes a warped, cruel failure, judged in terms of domestic tranquility. In essence, she is the opposite of Georgiana Peck, whose moral character uplifts those around her; Mrs. Flint denigrates and oppresses Linda, but she sees herself as the victim.

Jacobs describes Mrs. Flint’s cruelty on numerous instances, beginning with her refusal to allow Linda to go to her father’s home after learning of his death; instead, Linda is “ordered to go for flowers, that [her] mistress’s house might be decorated for an evening party” (10). This incident identifies Mrs. Flint with the
traditionally female role of hostess, yet her lack of compassion places her far from the ideal. Also, like Georgiana Peck, Mrs. Flint has the responsibility of overseeing the domestic affairs of her slaves; however, unlike Georgiana, who gives her slaves their freedom, Mrs. Flint barely gives them basic necessities—“Provisions were weighed out by the pound and ounce, three times a day” to prevent the slaves from having more than they need, and she spits in the cooking pans to keep them from supplementing their “meagre fare” with gravy and other leftovers (12). Again, the location of such a scene, the kitchen, fits neatly within her prescribed role, but her emotional detachment makes her less “feminine.” The one instance in which Mrs. Flint appears to show emotional attachment to a slave is her offer to have Aunt Nancy buried at the foot of her own grave, echoing the slave woman’s relative position to her each night of her life. However, this is “An ambiguous attachment indeed: the display of affection continues possession and dependency even in the grave” (Portelli 85)—her concern is not for Nancy but for her own peace of mind.

As portrayed by Jacobs, Mrs. Flint’s hypocrisy appears to be at the heart of her failure to maintain the domestic ideal. In the same paragraph that Linda notes her mistress is “a member of the church,” she also describes her as being able to “sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash,” a highly un-Christian reaction to another’s suffering (12). Furthermore, Linda identifies this paradoxical Christianity with her mistress’s physical frailty—she “was totally deficient in energy”—and her domestic failure—“She had not the strength to superintend her household duties” (12). Perhaps the most powerful
example of this failure is her inability to regulate the behavior of those within her home. She does not exert a "moralizing influence," although Jacobs writes that she could have: Mrs. Flint "might have used this knowledge (of her husband's behavior) to counsel and to screen the young and innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy" (31). And in fact, her use of the Bible in the narrative highlights her hypocrisy. Franny Nudelman writes of Mrs. Flint's forcing Linda to swear on the Bible and questioning her about her relationship with Dr. Flint. Nudelman sees the Bible as symbolic of "the possibility of communication and shared values. [But] Mrs. Flint's inability to recognize and honor the Bible's significance makes communion between the two women impossible:" (953), since Mrs. Flint uses the Bible simply as a means of obtaining information from the slave who does honor its significance.

However, the scene Nudelman discusses does also have a positive implication for Linda; although Mrs. Flint's emotional reaction comes not from sympathy but from "anger and wounded pride," it does have the effect of rescuing Linda from having to sleep in Dr. Flint's room (33). But Flint's behavior has so infected his marriage that, according to Dalton, "Flint's wife becomes an embodiment of his own lascivious behavior; like his familiar or a succubus, she acts out his abuse by standing over Brent's bed and accosting her when she believes she is asleep" (44). Linda says that, like Dr. Flint, "she whispered in my ear," and like an evil spirit, "she would glide stealthily away" if Linda awoke (34). Such behavior on the part of her "good Christian" mistress allows Linda to "see through the fiction of genteel womanhood which imprisons her mistress, and through the institution of slavery which imprisons
them both" (Portelli 86), and Linda says, “I pitied Mrs. Flint” (34). However, Portelli may overestimate precisely to what degree Linda sees Mrs. Flint as “imprisoned”; after all, the simple fact of her whiteness protects Mrs. Flint from most of the suffering Linda endures. Nevertheless, that Mrs. Flint does suffer as a direct result of slavery is an important point, since it is the distorting influence of the institution that causes her to stray from the feminine ideal, a common theme both in slave narratives and in literary criticism; Minrose C. Gwin writes that narrators who describe some white women as “enraged monsters”

... seem to view their mistresses as specters of slavery itself ... [T]he white women become evil creatures, nurtured by the institution which allows them and their husbands absolute power over other human beings ... [Such] autobiographies portray the white southern woman as defiled not only by her husband’s sexual misdeeds but by her own acts of cruelty to the black woman. (45)

Yet Linda’s response to the cruelty and degradation she experiences in the Flint home defiles her too, at least in terms of the white feminine ideal of purity, because she trades one white lover for another, Mr. Sands. The debate over whether Jacobs subscribes to this ideal or seeks to subvert it, along with the implications these particulars incidents have for her narration are, again, not the focus here. What is important is that she does act against her grandmother’s moral principles, essentially the same as those of idealized white women. And while she is empowered by her ability to choose and it does serve to protect her from Flint, at least to some extent,
she also becomes vulnerable because she gives birth to two children who must “follow the condition of the mother.” In this way, Linda is an agent in her own suffering because her actions create for her another area of vulnerability—her children.

It is precisely this area of vulnerability, Linda’s attempt to approximate white domesticity through the creation of her own family, that produces in her grandmother—a woman to whom Linda admits she is indebted for many of her comforts—another enemy. In her grandmother’s case, just as with Mrs. Flint’s, hypocrisy appears to be at the heart of the conflict, although Aunt Martha’s is certainly rooted in more than jealousy and anger. For Linda, the problem with her grandmother is the confusion of the double message Aunt Martha constantly sends: morality, including chastity, on one hand, obedience to the master on the other. In this way, Linda’s grandmother becomes, according to Gloria T. Randle, both her “ideal and her nemesis—on the one hand, an exemplary model whom she can never hope to emulate; on the other, an unrealistic disemboweling model from whom she wants to break free” (46). In fact, Randle’s description of the ambiguous model offered by Linda’s grandmother could just as easily characterize the model of the white domestic ideal, an equally elusive construct. Linda expresses this confusion over Aunt Martha’s (and, by extension, the white woman’s) conflicting moral code and persona when she says,

I longed for someone to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my grandmother’s faithful bosom, and told her
all my troubles... [A]lthough my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her. I had been accustomed to look up to her with a respect bordering upon awe. I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict on such subjects. (28-29)

And indeed, Linda is correct that her grandmother will not be very understanding of her plight, since when she does finally reveal that she is pregnant with Mr. Sands’ child, Aunt Martha responds by calling Linda “a disgrace to [her] dead mother” and by taking Linda’s mother’s wedding ring and silver thimble from her (56-57). The removal of these objects is significant, in that it signifies Linda’s inability to successfully create a legitimate home and family, according to white standards.

However, Linda’s grandmother does relent and comes to pity the girl, although she never appears to recognize her own role in Linda’s confusion. It is important to note that, from the beginning, Linda describes her parents as having complexions of “a light shade of brownish yellow, and [they] were termed mulattoes” (5), which implies that even her grandmother has not lived up to her own moral code. Citing Anna Freud, Randle explains such conflicting behavior as “a classic response to untenable circumstances and loathsome memories” (50), since it is likely that Aunt Martha was placed in a similar position as Linda, and her strong reaction to Linda’s behavior is a “coping mechanism [that] protects her equilibrium and sense of self,” though it “seriously undermines those of her granddaughter” (51). Therefore, while Linda’s grandmother upholds her duty to educate her family with regard to morality,
the education she administers is conflicting, and the outcome is the further fracture of her already damaged family.

During Linda's adolescence, then, she witnesses the inability of both Mrs. Flint and her own grandmother to adhere to the domestic ideal; little wonder it is, then, that she too is incapable of creating her own "safe haven." However, in the next major section of the narrative, Linda is successful in attaining her freedom, and this degree of safety from slavery marks a tentative step in the direction of the ideal for which she is searching. However, like her grandmother, who is herself free but who must watch over her family members still in bondage, Linda must also compromise her own comfort and freedom in order to at least partially fulfill her role as mother. Furthermore, she attempts to navigate the tension between her desire for freedom and her desire to raise her children from an already conflicted place—her grandmother's home. In essence, she goes from being expelled from grandmother's home upon her announcement of her pregnancy to being virtually imprisoned in it, and the grandmother who wanted nothing to do with her now becomes her primary caregiver.

Upon her escape, Linda receives assistance from a variety of people, from the unnamed friend who initially conceals her, to her "kind benefactress," the white neighbor who harbors her, to Peter, who takes her into the swamp. But finally, Linda returns to a familiar place—her grandmother's home. However, for concealment purposes, she is relegated to a tiny space above the storeroom; and it is from there that she attempts to maintain her family for the next seven years. This home is a private sphere within a private sphere. It is so private, in fact, that it cannot even approximate
the domestic ideal because it is so opposite what it should be: it contains no comfort, no safety, and no family. But what it does offer is relief from the Flint family and plantation labor; as well as a way to vicariously experience family life, since Linda can watch her children through a small opening in the wall.

Gloria T. Randle writes of Linda's move to the garret as a reentrance to her own infancy: "The garret shelters her from adult dangers, and leaving would be tantamount to abandoning the safety of the womb" (53). Yet to characterize a place as a "womb" implies warmth, safety, nurturing—and comfort; but for a place to be inhabited for seven years, Linda's garret-home is incredibly uncomfortable. It is "only nine feet long and seven feet wide," and its highest point is but three feet high (114). Even nature seems to show disrespect for this home: neither light nor air penetrates the space, and Linda calls it an "oppressive" place as a result (114). In the winter, "the cold penetrated through the thin shingle roof, and [she] was dreadfully chilled," even to the point of suffering frostbite (116). In the summer, the roof melts into her space, and at other times, she is soaked by storms (121). Rats and mice run over her bed, and Linda is "tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced [her] skin, and produced an intolerable burning" (115). But despite such hardships, Nudelman points out that this "domestic imprisonment" is her best chance for safety (958), since she is hidden from any who would betray her, both northern and southern, and her "invisibility is a means to freedom" (959). Thus, Linda's makeshift "home" cannot shelter her from nature, but it does offer the promise of future comfort in freedom.
However, Linda lives in constant fear of discovery. When she becomes ill, her delirium poses a threat, not to mention the very real possibility that her suffering in the garret will be for naught if she cannot survive it (122). And of course, those who know of her presence and who assist her, such as Aunt Martha, Aunt Nancy, and Uncle Phillip, are at risk, should they be discovered to have aided a fugitive. Yet all involved appear to see the value in the experience. After all, her escape does cause one positive change—the release of the children to her grandmother. With this news, Linda says, “The darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away” (109), and her later ability to actually watch her children accounts for her capacity to endure her tiny space. But the lack of a “proper home” makes Linda unable to truly mother her children, and she must endure the knowledge of what is happening to them at same time. For example, when she sees Benny “covered with blood” after being bitten by a dog, Linda can only listen to his cries as his wounds are treated: “O, what torture to a mother’s heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him!” (123). This is in stark contrast to an earlier desire expressed by Linda—that of Ben’s death as an alternative to slavery: “Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy” (62). Of this conflict in maternal feelings, Caroline Levander writes that it is caused by “the inherent conflict between the condition of slavery and the maternal instinct” (34). Such a statement is, indeed, upheld by Linda’s change in feeling for her son’s life once he is situated in a loving home, relatively sheltered from slavery. And in fact, Randle proposes that the children have, during this time, taken on an almost parental role with regard to their mother: “Having eventually become aware of her presence, they
have protected her secret despite continued pressure to reveal her whereabouts" (54). In other words, the children provide an additional layer of “shelter” for their hidden mother.

For Linda, then, her confinement in “a place of purgatory for seven years” (Randle 55), represents another period in her life characterized by the inability to achieve the domestic ideal. Her “home” does not resemble the ideal in appearance or in function; she cannot really be a wife or mother while so confined. However, she is at least able to watch over her children, send them gifts, and make decisions that relate to them, and her intention to nurture differentiates her from another “domestic failure,” such as Mrs. Flint, whose selfish cruelty is beyond redemption. It is from this state of “limbo” that Linda moves to the final “home” of her story, the Bruce home. While significantly different regarding comfort, treatment, and relationships, this home still represents for her an inability to fully assume for herself the roles traditionally associated with white wives and mothers.

Linda’s role in the Bruce home is as close to mother as is possible, however, since she is hired as a nurse to Mrs. Bruce’s baby. This home, unlike her garret is an accommodating one; in fact, upon discovery that Linda’s health diminishes her ability to do her work, Mrs. Bruce not only modifies her work but also seeks medical attention for her (168). Yet as comfortable as this new home is, it does not belong to Linda. As Mauri Skinfill writes, “A new white mistress rises up in place of the old one” (74). Nevertheless, while Skinfill’s description suggests a dominant-subordinate relationship, this mistress is “a kind and gentle lady, and proved a true
and sympathizing friend,” one who frequently notices Linda’s sadness and seeks to alleviate it (168). However, Linda’s understandable distrust of white women, even those who are kind, prevents her from sharing her secrets—of her past and later, of her writing. Because of this, Mrs. Bruce (both the first and the second) exert the same sort of moral influence over Linda that her grandmother did, with the effect of making her ashamed, but with the important difference of their successful adherence to the white domestic ideal as their foundation.

Yet as kind as the Bruce family is to Linda, it is not a stable home for her because of the constant threat of recapture, brought about by the Fugitive Slave Act. The possibility of losing this new “family” looms over Linda, although the second Mrs. Bruce goes to great lengths to protect her, even to the extent of persuading Linda to travel with her baby, saying “for if they get on your track, they will be obliged to bring the child to me; and then, if there is a possibility of saving you, you shall be saved” (194). And in fact, Mrs. Bruce, does finally save Linda from slavery by purchasing her freedom; and this creates a further conflict for Linda. Although Mrs. Bruce says she would have done so even if Linda were planning to leave, Linda feels that “It is a privilege to serve” the woman who has freed her and that “Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side” (201). Her decision to stay with the Bruce family costs her the opportunity to “sit with [her] children in a home of [her] own,” and while she says that she “long[s] for a hearthstone of [her] own, however humble” (201), she does not act upon this desire.

Randle portrays this decision to remain with the Bruces as “a picture of a
woman who embraces another woman’s child because she is already estranged from her own children” (54), and Franny Nudelman concurs that “Jacobs’s situation in the Willis household resembles the plight of the slave woman on the southern plantation” because the demands of the white family diminish the black woman’s capacity to care for her own (960). With Benjamin in California and Ellen at boarding school, it appears that she has been unable to recreate the maternal bonds strained during her time in the garret. However, the separation between Linda and her children is more one of circumstance and opportunity than of emotional distance, since unlike her grandmother, she is finally able to share with Ellen her “early sufferings in slavery” and “how nearly they had crushed [her]” (188). In this way, she eliminates for Ellen the moral confusion she felt as a result of her grandmother’s advice. At the same time, her decision to raise baby Mary is an attempt to live up to her grandmother’s moral code, since “Baby Mary symbolizes Brent’s immaculate conception—untainted by sexuality or immorality” (Randle 55).

At the end of her narrative, Jacobs depicts a woman still striving for her own home and family. Unlike the women in Clotel, who die after falling from a position that approximates the white domestic ideal, such as Clotel, Currer, and Althesa’s daughters, Linda Brent struggles through harsh, degrading circumstances to attain freedom and respectability. If, as Andrea O’Reilly Herrera writes, “marriage was viewed as the fulfillment of a woman’s destiny” (56), then Linda fails—she is unmarried and has borne two illegitimate children. However, in the role of mother, she achieves a certain degree of success. Her “wounded heart was soothed” by her
new role as nurse to Mrs. Bruce’s baby (170), and although she is separated from her children, both during her time in the garret and at the end of her story, she does not experience the emotional detachment that slavery often brought; in fact, she is able to reveal to her daughter secrets which she could reveal to no one else, not even her readers, since she leaves out the details of her abuse. So while her search for the “home” of the nineteenth-century ideal is fruitless, Jacobs’s Incidents offers as the reason for this failure not some inherent deficiency in the maternal/domestic capabilities of the black woman, but the effects of an institution that wrests control of the domestic sphere from all those who live under the slave system.
Chapter 4

Masculinity and the Defense of the Home in Frank J. Webb's
The Garies and Their Friends

The relative success or failure of the home according to its resemblance to the nineteenth-century ideal continues to be a major theme in the final work to be discussed, The Garies and Their Friends, by Frank J. Webb. This work shares with Clotel and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl a concern for the effect of slavery's violence on the home and an awareness of the role of miscegenation or amalgamation in that violence. After all, "The Garies," the central family of the novel, consist of a white slave owner, his black wife (formerly his slave), and their biracial children. Furthermore, the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Garie are precipitated by a mob acting in opposition to such amalgamation. Clearly, then, one of Webb's concerns is the instability of a home that lacks racial clarity. However, it would be unfair to categorize Webb's novel as an anti-amalgamation work solely on this basis, since he does not imply that life is easier for families that are entirely black or white. For example, the Ellis and Walters homes are both attacked violently, and even the white homes of Mr. Stevens and Mrs. Bird are not immune, though they experience significantly different disruptions. Like William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb suggests that slavery is so disruptive a force that no family is entirely safe from its effects. Therefore, while the action of the novel occurs in the North, with slavery as an apparently "minor" issue and racism as the focus, Webb's writing is no less antislavery than Brown's or Jacobs's.
However, one important difference to note is that of the characters upon whom the authors have focused. Whereas Brown and Jacobs focus on female characters—Currer, Clotel, Althesa, Linda, Aunt Martha, Mrs. Bruce—with the male characters’ role tending toward that of oppressor (whether by intention or not), Webb centers his novel around the men at the head of each household—Mr. Garie, Mr. Walters, Mr. Ellis, Mr. Stevens. Nonetheless, the same principle applies: Success or failure in the home depends on the capacity of the characters to create the white domestic ideal. The fact that in the novel, the men are those principally responsible for this success or failure serves to highlight the extent to which the home, though traditionally a woman’s domain, is a man’s responsibility. Yet while Brown and Jacobs define the domestic struggle in terms of trying to create a home, Webb sees it as a matter of defense, and the men of these households are faced with literal attacks upon their homes. Each of the three main “heads of household”—Mr. Garie, Mr. Walters, and Mr. Ellis—respond somewhat differently to such violence, and in the end, only Mr. Walters succeeds in overcoming it; however, the fact that his home is vulnerable to attack in the first place reveals a possible weakness. In this work, slavery, racism, and the violence caused by each, undermine this most basic unit of American society—white or black—by upsetting traditional gender roles, creating a failure of idealized white domesticity.

Despite the focus of this discussion on the relationship between masculinity, domestic, and violence, many studies of this novel deal with the relationship of The Garies and Their Friends to sentimental literature, like the criticism of Clotel and
Incidents; A.L. Nielsen compares Webb's use of the "tragic mulatto" character to that of Twain's in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and James H. DeVries analyzes the sentimental conventions of the novel, most notably through the discussion of the "hero," Mr. Garie, and the "villain," Mr. Stevens. He also addresses the novel's apparent lack of popularity, though he attributes this to "the subject of *The Garies*—Northern racism," and not its sentimentality (242). However, R. F. Bogardus interprets *The Garies* as a realist work, admitting however that it does contain sentimental elements. Robert S. Levine's discussion of the historical background of the novel lends credence to both views, sentimentalist and realist, by showing through the theme of temperance how the novel is both rooted in historical events and sentimentally drawn so as to achieve maximum impact. However, the importance of the works of S. Bradley Shaw, Susan L. Ro\-\acters, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who discuss the idealized gender roles and domesticity of the nineteenth century, cannot be underestimated, as it is this lens through which we must view the novel if we are to understand how violence affects the home.

Traditionally, masculinity and femininity are dichotomized as belonging to separate spheres, with separate characteristics that rarely overlap, a separation that is upheld by Webb's novel through its very disruption. The public sphere is the traditionally masculine domain, but men are also seen as rulers of their households, protectors of their families, and when violence is done, it is always committed by men. To contextualize Webb's purposes, it is important to note that in his time, a formulaic image of ruthless, power-hungry American manhood had
developed: “To be a real man, as every foreign observer remarked of Americans at this time, was to have strong opinions on a narrow range of subjects while bending one’s life and liberty to the pursuit of money and property.” Traits such as self-sacrifice and sensitivity to the needs of others were anathema to this crude masculine stereotype. Such “virtues were deemed feminine—ignominious and sissy!” (Wolff 599)

In response to the hyper-masculine stereotype, many people tried to revise America’s notion of manhood from “belligerent, combative masculinity [that was] one source of the nation’s moral and political crisis” (Wolff 600) to “the precept of fraternal love,” which was a “more compassionate, less aggressive definition of masculinity” (Wolff 601). In place of the glorification of conquest and competition, seen as perpetuating the system of slavery, this movement sought to define male relationships through non-violence and affection for one another (Wolff 601). Such anti-aggressive behaviors were not seen by proponents of fraternal love as “sissy” or weak, but instead as the kind of strength exhibited by the “ultimate revolutionary,” Jesus (Wolff 602); through more compassionate behavior, American men would be able to save the nation and abolish slavery. To extend Wolff’s argument, to The Garies, then, the failure of the men in Webb’s novel to improve the condition of the country or to accomplish abolition is a direct result of their refusal (in the case of Stevens) or inability (in the cases of Walters and Garie) to live by this standard.

As the eponymous family of the novel, the Garies are a prime example of how the existence of slavery, and the related racial prejudice, makes domestic success
impossible, despite a close approximation of the white ideal. In the very first paragraph of the novel, Webb describes the ultra-domestic scene of the family meal in terms of great wealth: "all those delicacies that, in the household of a rich Southern planter, are regarded as almost necessaries of life" are strawberries "plentifully sprinkled" with sugar, "Geeche limes, almost drowned in their own rich syrup," "a silver basket filled with a variety of cakes," "corn-flappers, which were piled ... Like a mountain" covered in "tiny rivulets of butter" (1). Such a description has the immediate effect of giving the reader a sense of comfort and wealth, indicators that this is a successful home. Furthermore, Mrs. Garie, the ultimate domestic ornament, is said to be "a lady of marked beauty," much like Clotel; she has "gloriously dark eyes" that are noted to be "of African extraction" and "a subdued expression that sank into the heart and at once riveted those who saw her" (2). And to complete the picture, she is depicted with her children, an indication that the family is complete.

However, it is precisely Emily's "African extraction" which makes the family less than ideal, since Emily cannot be Clarence Garie's legal wife, vulnerable to the fate of Clotel or Linda, and it is for this reason that they decide to move north. Immediately, the family's vulnerability, which stems directly from living under the slave system, becomes apparent. On their passage north, other travelers comment on the makeup of their family, and it is evident upon arrival at their new home that this domestic circle is not as sound. Upon entering the home, Mrs. Garie notes that "it is a little chilly," and instead of the luxurious table of their southern home, they eat corn-bread and tea (117). As early as the next morning, Mrs. Garie falls ill, and she never
fully recovers—and therefore is incapable of creating a “domestic sanctuary” for her family.

Mr. Garie also falls victim to the ills of the north, although in at least one instance, he is able to recover, with help from Mr. Ellis: when he asks Dr. Blackly, a minister, to perform the wedding ceremony (which is to give Emily and the children the protection that Clotel and Althesa’s children never had), the minister refuses on the grounds that he does “not believe in the propriety of amalgamation,” a revelation which shocks Mr. Garie (137). DeVries sees Mr. Garie as “the prime example of the white man who is unable to comprehend the malevolence of racism” and calls his ignorance of racial prejudice “tragic” (245). Indeed it is, since while Garie overcomes the problem of the uncooperative minister with relative ease, his attitude is relatively unchanged, and “Moments before his death he cannot believe that someone would wish to harm him simply because he has a black wife. He is still a Southern gentleman who expects no one to judge what he does because he is white” (DeVries 246). Unfortunately, such ignorance produces the failure of his domestic sphere, quite literally in fact; “the mob broke in at the front” of the home, and within a few seconds, and trying to disguise the path by which his family has escaped, Garie is killed (223). The escape of his family would make such a self-sacrifice heroic, but the deaths of Emily and the newborn complete the fracture of the family, as little Clarence and Em are orphaned.

Because he is naïve about the true danger of racism, Mr. Garie fails to protect his family from the violence of racism, which in turn prevents Mrs. Garie from
fulfilling her role in the home. However, Webb offers a variety of families and numerous reactions to racial prejudice, some of which are more successful. He clearly shows the inability of the family of ambiguous racial identity to survive, and in fact, for even individual characters to survive without clear racial identity; the two black characters who pass as white in the novel, Mr. Winston and Clary, fail—Mr. Winston fails in that he is sent out of the country for the majority of the novel, where his race is not an impediment, and Clary dies after his race is discovered and his engagement canceled. However, Webb also gives examples of both white and black families who achieve differing degrees of success with respect to the creation of a “domestic sanctuary.” In the cases of the Walters and Ellis homes, the success of this “sanctuary” is directly related to the dominant male figure’s ability to defend the family and home against invasion.

For Frank J. Webb, the Walters household, as it exists at the end of the novel, is the metaphor for the problems created by racial prejudice and the violence it brings as a result of having disrupted these gender roles. At first glance, the household is a representation of a safe home, but is also described as luxurious, indicating a measure of Walters’ success by white masculine standards. Walters’ home is thought to be “Quite a handsome residence,” according to Mr. Garie (121), with “spotless marble steps and shining silver door-plate” (121). The home “indicates great wealth, [and] cultivated taste and refined habits,” with its “richly papered walls... adorned by paintings from the hands of well-known foreign and native artists” and “rich vases,” “well-executed bronzes,” and “charming little bijoux which the French only are
capable of conceiving, and which are only at the command of such purchasers as are possessed of more money than they otherwise can conveniently spend" (121). In fact, the home is exemplary in its luxury and display of wealth, since none other is described as being so lavish.

Mr. Walters' home is also relatively safe; it becomes a haven for the Ellis family, driven out of their home by the threat of a riot, since it is "quite indefensible (it being situated in a neighborhood swarming with the class of which the mob was composed)" (204). However, while the Walters home becomes the central defensive location during the mob attack, it also becomes the center of the family and familial relationships: the Ellises make it their home, after theirs becomes "a heap of smoking ruins" at the hands of the mob (231); Esther marries Mr. Walters, officially cementing the bond between the two families; and Charlie Ellis marries Emily Garie there, completing the linkage between the three households.

The description of his house alone is sufficient to portray his wealth, but we also learn from Mr. Ellis that Walters is "a dealer in real estate," which is unusual enough for a black man that Mr. Winston assumes Walters must be white (50). Ellis continues on to describe Walters as "very wealthy; some say that he is worth half a million of dollars. He owns . . . one hundred brick houses . . . [and] ten thousand dollars' worth of stock, in a railroad" (50). On the surface, then, the Walters home appears to be the best a black man or family can hope for.

However, this is exactly Webb's point—that although the Walters home is the best a black man can attain, it is still illustrative of the problems caused by racial
prejudice. Even Walters himself depicts this point; he has achieved a great deal, even by the standards of white men, but he still does not fit the traditional model of masculinity. He is a businessman, and therefore, he deals in the public sphere; however, even he, with all of his wealth, cannot exert much influence over the public domain. He is even forcibly removed from a car on the railroad in which he owns stock, so his status as a stockholder is secondary to his status as a black man (50). The argument that his participation in the white business world signals “a surrendering to the Protestant-capitalist norms of the white community” thus becomes irrelevant, as the white community does not recognize him as an equal anyway; while Robert S. Levine sees Walters as “all too ready to enter the comfortable world of [his] oppressors” (Levine, “Disturbing Boundaries” 350, 367), he will always be subjected to a different standard of treatment regardless of his wealth.

For example, when warned about the riots to come, Walters reminds the mayor of the “many very serious disturbances [that] have occurred lately” between blacks and whites in an effort to obtain protection, but his reminder is dismissed; to the mayor, who respects Walters enough to remember having “the pleasure of transacting business with” him, such “disturbances” are “nothing more than trifling combats” (202). When he is even more direct, stating that “we certainly deserve protection,” the mayor will commit only “two or three police,” since he feels the matter is “out of [his] jurisdiction” (202). Walters, though “masculine” in his success in the public financial sphere, is here emasculated by his inability to gain protection for himself or his property and community.
However, Webb does not allow Walters to be as thoroughly emasculated as Garie is. Although Walters fails to receive public support against the angry mob, he succeeds in protecting his home and those in it. Yet in the process of doing so, Webb highlights another problem for even the successful black man—the need to defend one’s property at all. This is not a problem faced by any white household in the novel; the preparation for defense against violent attack is uniquely a black situation.

Furthermore, the need to defend the house itself disrupts gender roles, as women, traditionally not agents of violence, take an active role in the defense and counterattack. Mrs. Ellis represents the most feminine role during the attack, as she sees even the preparations as “dreadful,” and declares, “it almost frightens me out of my wits to see so many dangerous weapons scattered about” (204). Caddy is more aggressive, designing with Kinch a combination of hot water and cayenne pepper that is quite effective at repelling attackers. Interestingly, although Caddy does participate in the attack, her “weapons” are indistinguishable from her usual household tools, even to the extent that the others fear that her “propensity to dabble in soap and water has overcome [her] even at this critical time” (207). Even in attack, she remains inextricably linked to the more feminine tasks of cooking and cleaning.

The usually “quiet Esther,” however, best illustrates the disruptive effects of violence upon gender roles when she declares that preparing for the attack “takes all the woman out of [her] bosom” (205): She states, “It makes me wish I were a man” (204). She further stretches the bounds of feminine behavior by asking to learn to load pistols; although she does not go so far as to fire them, she wishes to be of help
when the men are busy (206). She is also the character who is calmest during danger, when an ember threatens to ignite a large amount of gunpowder. As the others either flee or stand stunned, she "retain[s] her presence of mind; spring[s] forward, [and] grasp[s] the blazing fragment and dash[es] it back again into the grate" (209). She is also the first to volunteer to brave the angry crowd to warn the Garies of the coming attack (216). In the end, though, her only real action is that of preserving the safety of others, and while it does cause her to face danger, it is at heart, a variation of the nurturing "mother" role; she does not act upon the riskier or more violent wishes she expresses, but the fact that she expresses them at all highlights the effect that this violence has had upon her perception of gender roles.

The attack by the mob does not effectively invert gender roles, but rather causes a paradox for each: Walters, the most traditionally masculine black character, is at his most violent when in his own home, the more feminine of the two dichotomized realms. He is not, by virtue of his race, allowed to be fully "masculine" outside of it, which necessitates that he exhibit an inappropriate amount of violence in a domain that is, traditionally, supposed to be free of violence. In effect, he is both an agent of and victim of violence, just as the women are.

The Walters household is further problematized after the attack, when Walters assumes the role of "father" for the Ellis family, as a result of Mr. Ellis's injuries. First, it is not until later that the "family" is truly his, since at first he bears no blood relationship to those of whom he is head. And secondly, that household contains within it a constant reminder of the violence of the mob in Mr. Ellis, who frequently
cries out in terror of an imaginary mob. Thus, the family created by the violent situation illustrates Webb’s belief that while black people can be successful and can, to a certain extent, overcome prejudicial attitudes, their lives are negatively altered by them.

In addition to using the Walters household to symbolize the problems of slavery, prejudice, and violence, Webb also portrays the black home as invaded by aggressive, white force. For Webb, the black home is tenuous, and easily destroyed, best exemplified by the Ellis home. Mr. Ellis is emasculated by his inability to preserve the safety of his home, which is, while intact, portrayed as ideal. Webb therefore recognizes the ability of black people to establish strong, moral homes (by white standards), but also their ineffectual defense of both the literal place and the symbolic meanings of “home”: family and safety.

In Webb’s novel, Mr. Ellis is not given the possibility of modeling this new construction of masculinity; he is instead simply incapable of maintaining any masculinity in the wake of the violence he encounters. Although as a busy and well-respected carpenter, he certainly exists in the public sphere, he does not have unlimited access. He reminds his friend, Mr. Winston, of the limitations: “Either you must live exclusively amongst coloured people, or go to the whites and remain with them,” indicating that crossing back and forth between these worlds is unacceptable (44). Mr. Ellis is the head of a household, though he appears not to be the major decision-maker; regarding Charlie’s possible future in the employ of Mrs. Thomas, Mrs. Ellis “left her (Mrs. Thomas) with the intention of converting her husband to her
way of thinking” (26) and is successful—“after divers objections raised by him, and set aside by her, it was decided that Charlie should be permitted to go there for the holidays at least” (27). Yet these factors alone are not strong enough to constitute emasculation.

His inability to protect his family and home, however, is. The very location of Mr. Ellis’s home, so near the homes of those in the mob, makes it “quite indefensible,” and he must move his family to a safer area (Walters’ home) during the attack (202), so already he has become incapable of defending his property, which is invaded and utterly destroyed. Furthermore, his most heroic act, that of trying to warn the Garies of danger and, in this way, protect their family, ends with him as a victim of the violent mob. He is in this scene treated like an animal, “completely hemmed in, without the smallest chance for escape (218), and like a child, as he clings to a chimney “shrieking,—Save me! save me!—Help! help! Will no one save me?”” (218). Despite these “shrieks,” a term usually associated with a feminine response, he is attacked savagely; not only is he incapable of defending the home but also of defending himself:

Despite his cries and resistance, they forced him to the edge of the roof; he clinging to them the while, and shrieking in agonized terror.

Forcing off his hold, they thrust him forward and got him partially over the edge, where he clung calling frantically for aid. One of the villains, to make him loose his hold, struck on his fingers with the handle of a hatchet found on the roof; not succeeding in breaking his hold by these
means, with an oath he struck with the blade, severing two of the fingers from one hand and deeply mangling the other. (219)

After the attack by the mob, he is not only severely wounded, but is also deprived of any identity; when bystanders try to ascertain his name or address, they find no indication of either. This is fitting, since he no longer has a residence, its having been burned, and because of the severity of his wounds, he loses the masculine capability of providing for the family to which he has given his name—he has lost his masculine identity altogether.

From this point on in the novel, Mr. Ellis serves only as a reminder of violence; he never recovers to the point that he can provide for his family, and he has been so scarred by the episode that any commotion recalls it immediately to him. At the wedding of Emily and Charlie, he is described as being “almost hidden in his large easy chair. The poor old gentleman scarcely seemed able to comprehend the affair, and apparently laboured under the impression that it was another mob, and looked a little terrified at times when the laughter or conversation grew louder than usual” (372). For Webb, Mr. Ellis’s home and his inability to defend it is a metaphor for the black family’s constant fear of invading, violent white forces.

Lest the reader should believe that blackness is what creates such domestic failure, Webb surrounds the “problematic” Walters home and “invaded” Ellis home with polar opposites representing homes that cause the major problems and homes free of these problems altogether. The home that is the overall cause of the problem is characterized by a kind of “hyper-masculinity”: that is, a narrow portion of the
standard idea of masculinity, the ability and willingness to commit violence, taken to an extreme. The portrayal of Mr. Stevens, the head of such a home, is dominated by aggressive behavior, and such behavior is directly aimed at the black home.

In his physical description, Stevens does not give the appearance of benevolence; he is “not by any means prepossessing,” and he has “round shoulders, and long, thin arms, finished off by disagreeable-looking hands” (124). However, his description is even overtly demoniacal, as he has “thin grayish-red hair, that grew more thickly about his ears [that] was coaxed up” in an unsuccessful effort to cover his bald head. Instead, it “stopped half-way, as if undecided whether to lie flat or remain erect, producing the effect that would have been presented had he been decorated with a pair of horns” (124). To complete his physiognomy, he has “shaggy eyebrows,” “cunning-looking grey eyes,” “a continual nervous twitching [around his mouth], that added greatly to the sinister aspect of his face” (124). Stevens does not actually commit violence himself, but he remains the most violent character in the novel, since he orchestrates the mob attack and therefore causes the debilitation of Mr. Ellis and the deaths of Mrs. Garie, her newborn baby, and most directly, Mr. Garie.

His corruption extends to the other members of his household as well: his wife helps him persecute the Garies by forcing them out of school; his son ruins Clary’s chances of “passing” and marrying a white woman; and while his daughter does not engage in violence or malice, she is a victim of it in that she endures his drunken tirades. As a result, the Stevens women project an image of femininity inconsistent
with the ideals of white domesticity; Mrs. Stevens's interference with the Garie children is certainly not the "morally civilizing catalyst" (Shaw 75) that Georgiana Peck is, nor is her daughter, in her tacit acceptance of her father's drunken and bigoted behavior.

Webb, according to Robert S. Levine, tackles the problem of intemperance in the character of Stevens: his "uncontrollable appetite for money and power," rather than an innate joy of violence, is the motivation for his cruel instigations of violent actions (356). This hyper-masculine character is incapable of living peacefully alongside black domestic situations, and he causes the violent invasion that not only disrupts the black homes but also destroys those who do not counter with violence themselves. Thus, Stevens both shatters peaceful homes and causes violence in a character who is portrayed as an otherwise peaceful person—Mr. Walters.

In contrast, the home of Mrs. Bird in *The Garies and Their Friends* stands in direction opposition to such violence. This home represents an idyllic getaway that offers a brief respite but does not ultimately solve the problem of violence against the black home, much like Georgiana Peck's imperfect solution to giving her slaves their freedom. For example, Charlie's stay with Mrs. Bird does not shield him from racism, as she struggles to enroll him in school; neither can he remain with her indefinitely if he is to be of use in supporting his family.

However, this idealized home is female-dominated and contains no violence, although there is no indication that the white inhabitants are invulnerable to the effects of racial prejudice since Mrs. Bird suffers from her affiliation with Charlie by
having to ride in the "negro car" (111). Webb appears to subscribe, through his depiction of Mrs. Bird, to the notion of women as moral reformers who remained within the home to cultivate a redemptive sanctuary. This domestic or woman’s sphere provided males with relief from the trials of the public sphere and even more importantly offered feminine influence as the morally civilizing catalyst that would ultimately redeem the whole of culture. (Shaw 75)

Mrs. Bird is slightly more aggressive in her subversion of the establishment than Shaw’s description suggests, since she not only removes Charlie from the later violent environment, but she also inflicts damage upon segregationist views. She invites Charlie to dine at her table, setting an example for her own servants, and she takes him with her around town, not as a servant but as a guest, stirring the curiosity of the townspeople. Her petitioning of Mr. Whatley regarding Charlie’s schooling is well-received, and although Whatley is unsuccessful in his attempt to allow Charlie to be enrolled, the opposition he meets changes him from a reluctant spokesperson for Mrs. Bird to an active promoter of black education in the form of Sunday school. Furthermore, Charlie’s training makes it possible for him to slightly erode racial prejudice in his procurement of a job from Mr. Burrell, who originally refuses him. This ideal white home is entirely female-dominated, but Mrs. Bird does take on the problem of racial prejudice. However, all of her successful dealings with the problem occur within the domestic or religious spheres, as she is unsuccessful regarding school and transportation. Therefore, Webb limits the success of his white female character
to moral reform through leadership by example and sentimentality.

More than either *Clotel* or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *The Garies and Their Friends* addresses the relationship of violence to the black family and the impact such violence has on gender roles, both male and female. For Webb, it is not enough to attack the institution of slavery in the South or the Fugitive Slave Law; his goal is to show that shifts in and distortions of gender roles are both a cause and an effect of violence against the black home, and that while an idealized white getaway may be convenient for a character such as Charlie, it is incapable of counteracting the central problem of the hyper-masculine obsession with the destruction of black domesticity.
Chapter 5

Variations on a Theme: The Incompatibility of Family and Slavery

In each of the works addressed, the integrity of the family unit and even of the home itself are interrupted by the violent forces of slavery, directly or indirectly. At the source of the problems for the main families of the works are the relationships between slave women and white men. Because of their slave status, neither Currer nor Clotel can provide sufficient protection for their children, despite the fact that those children were fathered by wealthy white men; if even the children of Thomas Jefferson are vulnerable, then there can be little hope for the children of lesser men. Given the white man’s failure, even tacit refusal, to protect his offspring, the tireless efforts of the slave woman to adhere to the tenets of domesticity are in vain, since regardless of how closely she approximates it, she can never quite create the safe haven her children require.

For Linda Brent, this issue is more complicated, since unlike Clotel, she does not love the white man whose children she seeks to protect. In fact, Linda Brent must balance relationships with two different white men, Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands. In her attempt to escape the advances of Dr. Flint, she seeks out the relationship with Mr. Sands, but this relationship creates additional concern for her; when she does succeed in escaping from her master, she is confined—literally—by her need to watch over her children, if only from a distance. Because Linda Brent spends such a great deal of her life navigating between two worlds—slavery and freedom, mothered and mothering—she, too, is unable to ultimately succeed in creating a home that conforms
to the nineteenth-century ideal.

Finally, Mr. Garie, a wealthy slave owner, in trying to avoid the difficulty that beset Horatio Green, inadvertently plunges his family into more danger. Unlike Horatio Green, he is loyal to his slave/wife and even uproots the family to escape the bigotry of the South; however, his naiveté about the prejudice of the North leads to the deaths of all but one of his family members. Frank J. Webb's novel is a powerful illustration of the unfortunate reality that, even when a family is possessed of material means and good intentions on the part of both parents, it may still be unable to insulate itself from racist violence. While for William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs, the missing ingredients for domestic success appear to be legal freedom and the protection of the white male father, for Webb it is racial purity, or more specifically, whiteness, since he does not allow the otherwise successful Ellis family to end the story intact, despite their thorough blackness.

However tempting it may be to associate domestic failure with blackness, since black homes are those most obviously affected by the violence of slavery, these three works reveal the vulnerability of the white family as well; the well-intentioned Georgiana Peck, the jealous Mrs. Flint, and the murderous George Stevens are all equally unable to maintain a stable home. Furthermore, while many critics have focused on the powerlessness of women in nineteenth-century literature, it is clear that men of both races are equally helpless when it comes to providing for their families in the racial climate of the time: Horatio Green fails to free his "wife" and daughter, Mr. Sands can do little to ameliorate Linda Brent's situation, and Mr. Garie
leads his family to their deaths.

However, each of these works also has at least one character who reaches a degree of success, albeit limited. For example, Clotel's daughter Mary appears to finally escape the destructive cycle that betrayed both her mother and grandmother, yet she must flee to France to do so. Linda Brent and both of her children are free at the end of her story, but they are scattered across the country. And Emily Garie embraces her race and marries into the Ellis family, much of which has been taken in by Mr. Walters after Mr. Ellis is incapacitated.

Many of these similarities are, of course, attributable to the sentimental tradition in which each work is written, but it is also reasonable to credit their similar purposes. Each work is written to shed light on a disturbing issue: slavery in *Clotel* and *Incidents*, and racism in *The Garies*. Brown uses historical documents to lend realism to his otherwise sentimental story and to compound the impact of the tragedies of which he tells; Jacobs uses her own life story to do the same; and Webb relies on historical events for the inspiration for his work. Their basis in fact lends these works a credence that is essential to their power: if the goal is to change the attitude of the audience, the author must provide actual evidence that such a change is necessary. The range of characters in each of the works further adds to the effectiveness of such a purpose, since by involving black and white, male and female characters, the authors emphasize the ubiquity of the issue: no one is safe from the effects of slavery and its violence.

The inclusion of such a variety of characters also supports the claim that, in
these works, the effect on the family is just as important as, if not more important than, the effect on the individual. Each of the three authors, by introducing racial, gender, age, and class differences, makes the same point in a variety of ways: that the family unit is under constant and indefensible attack and that the real aggressor is no master or mob leader but slavery's inherent violence. Clotel appears to be an ideal wife, but she loses her daughter and commits suicide; Georgiana Peck represents true Christianity and the moralizing influence of women, but she dies and her freed slaves must leave the state; Linda Brent watches over her children but cannot mother them; Mrs. Flint is wealthy and white but is in a constant state of jealous paranoia; the Ellis family is happy and industrious but their home is destroyed; and Mr. Garie, the wealthy white slave owner, the supposed symbol of power, is murdered for choosing a wife of the "wrong" color. Each of the novels pairs a family of obvious difficulty with one that should, according to the traditional power structure, be able to control its surroundings, and in each work, both cases fail. The one constant through each of these domestic failures is this: that the family, any family, is disrupted by slavery itself and by its members' own responses to its inherent violence. The desire to achieve or to maintain the white domestic ideal is simply not enough to insulate the home from racist violence, and in the end, the widely varied characters are united in their failure to survive as a family unit.

Other discussions of these works often focus on the individual and his or her quest for freedom and identity; this thesis has analyzed them in terms of the most basic unit of society: the family. This shift in emphasis from individual to family unit
has implications for defining the effects of slavery on society. It has been well-established, through previous critiques, that slavery blurs racial classification through miscegenation and impedes the development of personal identity by erasing the line between person and property; this discussion adds to these the idea that the institution of slavery creates a violent disruption of the family. Society is built on the ways in which we identify ourselves—as individuals, by race, and as family members. If all three of these categories are distorted by slavery, we must necessarily define such a system as an attack on society itself.
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