

Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Mary McCartin Wearn.
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Reviewed by Roxanne Harde

Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature focuses on the cultural nexus of sentiment and motherhood in nineteenth-century America. Mary McCartin Wearn's project is to consider how the texts under examination—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Jacobs's personal narrative, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt's poetry, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*—"calculate the power of sentimental motherhood and weight it against the cultural costs of invoking such ideality" (11).

In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Wearn points out how the string of mothers throughout the novel engage in feminine, and successful, acts of civil disobedience within the domestic sphere and through the approved discipline of female self-denial. While she might have made more of Stowe's Eliza, the slave woman "with the natural instincts of motherhood, characteristics at the time deemed 'white,' even in the North" (20), Wearn offers a detailed discussion about how Stowe both used and criticized the regulatory social functions of motherhood to make her political points. Wearn draws interesting conclusions about how Stowe comes close to equating Marie's destructive sentimentalism with the norm for female subjectivity, and discussion of gothic dislocations in relation to Cassie is intriguing, if somewhat disjointed. While Cassie's liberatory movements might seem to contradict her argument that Stowe's political strategies "leave her little room for developing complex feminine subjectivity, for the good mother-figures in her novel must be constrained by the limits of proper, sentimental maternity," Wearn makes the case that Cassie ends up in as constricting a role as the rest of the mothers in the novel (35). Wearn's readings of the novel's depictions of motherhood, particularly those overblown with sentiment, such as mothers mourning children or those whose children are threatened, are first-rate. Overall, Wearn is correct in arguing that even as Stowe offers new agency to women, in no way does she suggest they might transcend their domestic roles or claim autonomy; however, the text might have linked Stowe's success to women's general success as abolitionists, which in turn engendered women's rights movements later in the century.

Wearn's discussions of sentiment and motherhood in Jacobs's narrative and Piatt's poetry also offer insight into nineteenth-century American culture. Wearn examines the political agenda behind Jacobs's maternal narrative, how she exposes the dangers of the maternal role and affection for slave women, negotiates between her sexual life and nineteenth-century expectations, and

uses the pseudonym Linda Brent to hide a radical maternal subjectivity under the “unthreatening veneer of sentimental motherhood” (80). Wearn aligns Jacobs with freedom-loving and self-reliant male slaves who escaped more than traditional female values or the behaviour of female slaves who are mothers. Motherly love alone, unlike the case of Stowe’s Eliza, is not enough to save Jacobs, Wearn points out as she shows how the text demonstrates the ways in which the social codes of maternity, most often voiced by Jacobs’s grandmother, serve as a daunting force of oppression standing in the way of her freedom and autonomy and function to keep her and her children enslaved: “In Jacobs’s imagination, as in Hawthorne’s, individualist pursuits can never be successfully or completely reconciled with the requirements of home, family, and society” (103). In a series of astute readings, Wearn argues that Piatt’s poems about mothering are rooted in, even as they challenge, the “tradition of sentimental motherhood” (108). Wearn takes particular care with Piatt’s considerations of the negative aspects of lives too narrowly defined by maternity.

While Wearn’s examination of *The Scarlet Letter* offers an equally compelling reading of Hawthorne’s refusal to sentimentalize motherhood, her study of Hawthorne’s elaborations and critiques of sentimental maternal ideologies seems at cross purposes with the focus of this monograph. Arguing that Hawthorne doubts motherhood’s ability to transform a woman, Wearn points out that he complicates “the reigning cultural notions of womanhood that flourished in his time; he will render the ‘natural’ bonds of motherhood dangerously opaque; for whatever assumptions the Puritan community makes about Hester based on her maternity prove, in the end, to be dangerously in error” (49). For Wearn, Hester’s “nature as a woman” is not defined by her motherhood any more than Dimmesdale’s soul is defined by his role as a minister, and the chapter centres on Wearn’s contention that Hester is driven by her love for Dimmesdale not her affection for her daughter, and that Hawthorne uses this allegiance to complicate maternity as other than simplistic or sentimental. While Wearn makes interesting points about Hawthorne’s novel, she seems to struggle with making this discussion serve the purposes of her book, and it seems to me that *The Scarlet Letter* might have been replaced with a text more fully centred in issues of mothering.

Overall, as Wearn makes clear, Stowe, Jacobs, Piatt, and Hawthorne offer innovative representations of maternity as, more or less, cultural critiques and challenges; they question dominant White, middle-class values, and the expectations that constrict women’s options and choices. Wearn succeeds in complicating the ways in which we think about sentimental literature and the expectations of motherhood. While the controlling idea of *Negotiating Motherhood* is not groundbreaking, the text makes a solid contribution to considerations of gender and culture in nineteenth-century America.