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Rummaging Through the Past: The Cultural Work of Nostalgia in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s My Wife and I

by THEODORE R. HOVET

When Harriet Beecher Stowe published My Wife and I in 1871, Central Park had already become a monument to the nostalgia of many New Yorkers for the natural landscape that had supposedly existed before industrialization and urbanization. As Lawrence W. Levine explains, Frederick Law Olmsted attempted “to create and preserve a pastoral ethos . . . ‘of opposite conditions’ from those prevailing in the city” (202). A casual reader of the Central Park scenes in the novel could easily conclude that the author believed that Olmsted had succeeded. Eva Van Arsdale, the future “wife” of the title, describes her visit to the Park:

I might really have thought I was among the ferns and white birches up in Conway, or anywhere in the mountains, it was so perfectly mossy and wild and solitary, . . . And it appeared to me to produce the impression of utter solitude more than anything else. (370)

A careful rereading of the passage, however, discloses that it actually points to the gap between the representation of nature and the real thing. Eva “might have thought” she was alone in nature if she didn’t know that it merely “appeared . . . to produce the impression” of utter solitude. To emphasize that the Park is an artificial representation of nature, Stowe describes Eva coming upon a “railing and one seat” conveniently provided for the spectator (370). In short, Stowe simultaneously appeals to and undercutts nostalgia for pre-urban America, a strategy common in the products of popular culture. For example, a TV series like Picket Fences through its title, music, and visual imagery evokes intense nostalgia for small-town United States. However, this “golden age pastoral,” as Stowe calls comparable representations in her day of New England’s pre-industrial past (458), uses the simple social background of Rome, Wisconsin, to throw into sharp relief some of the darkest problems in contemporary society—AIDS, child abuse, racial conflict. The “picket fences” at one and the same time represent the beauty of a small town and the dangerous belief of provincials that they can keep out contemporary problems. Like Stowe’s Central Park scene, the picket fences undercut the very nostalgia they evoke.

Why does nostalgia in popular culture have this double movement? What cultural forces does it reflect? My Wife and I is a particularly rich site for exploring these questions. As a “serial story” published in the Christian Union which had more than 130,000 subscribers (Hedrick 379), it is aimed
directly at a mass audience. As Stowe explains in her “Introductory Note,” “it is now understood that whoever wishes to gain the public ear, and to pro-
pound a new theory, must do it in a serial story” (ix). She even jokes that if St. Paul were alive today he would have to sell his teachings to the popular press in this form if he were to have any influence (ix). She also has no qualms about informing her readers that she is going to appeal to their tastes by employing the wildly popular romance formula which she defines as “a story simply and mainly of love and marriage,” a “subject which is in every-
body’s mind and mouth” (x, xii). Her love story involves Harry Henderson, the narrator, who comes to New York to work in publishing, and Eva Van Arsdale, the daughter of a wealthy Wall Street financier.

But while Stowe develops the love story, she also evokes three major forms of nostalgia widely expressed in middle-class culture during this time: the longing for the kind of religious experience that presumably existed in the past, the longing for communion with nature such as had been described by writers like Emerson and Thoreau, and the longing for family-centered rural communities like the ones Horace Bushnell and others had described in their pastoral accounts of pre-industrial New England. Together, these forms of nostalgia, as Stowe had pointed out in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, constitute a “homesickness,” a “yearning” for some dimly conceived place of wholeness that one can never return to (320).

Before looking at these forms of nostalgia in detail, however, it is useful to raise the question of why works produced for a mass audience are more willing to appeal openly to nostalgia than those we associate with high culture.

As Lawrence W. Levine’s study of “Highbrow/Lowbrow” demonstrates, the socioeconomic elites in the United States in the nineteenth century were instrumental in creating the concept of “high art.” As Levine explains, the works assigned to high culture by the “arbiters” of taste are characterized as containing a spiritual element imparted by “genius.” This sacred dimension cannot be bestowed to works intended for sale to a mass market. Levine quotes a writer in *Scribners* in 1877: “The development of artistic taste may be compared with what the religious calls ‘growth in grace.’ There is such a thing as ‘the witness of the spirit,’ in art as in religion” (150). This “sacral-
ization” of art is not merely innocent wishfulness. It helps preserve social hierarchy. As Levine explains, “the cloak of culture—approved, sanctified, conspicuous culture—promised to become a carapace impervious to assault from above or below” (227).

The sacralization of high art was not lost on Stowe, who was already being lumped in with the purveyors of popular fiction by such arbiters of lit-

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1. Amy Kaplan looks at the relationship of this kind of nostalgia to the popular historical novel in “Romancing the Empire.” Fred Davis points out that nostalgia seems to be particularly prevalent among the upwardly mobile urban class, the class Stowe was particularly addressing in her “New York novels.” For this group, Davis speculates, nostalgia simplifies the past so that it becomes a benchmark for measuring how far they’ve come in a more complex world (45).
erary art as William Dean Howells and Henry James (Miller 26–30). In My Wife and I, Harry’s friend indignantly notes how a literary work such as Rossetti’s “Jenny,” a poem about a man’s ruminations on a prostitute, is treated like a religious work. It is praised by “religious papers” and “lies around on pious people’s tables, and nobody dares to say a word because it’s ‘artistic.’ People are so afraid they shall not be supposed to understand what high art is that they’ll knuckle down under most anything” (155).

One consequence of sacralizing art in this manner is that artists who aspire to artistic status repress in their work forms and feelings popular in mass culture, particularly the happy-ever love story or the open expression of nostalgia. As Andreas Huyssen points out, “Time and again documents from the late 19th century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture” so that “art” can distance itself from “the trivialities and banalities of everyday life” (49, 47). Fred Davis explains that if high art does deal with nostalgia it does so in a way that distances itself from the masses by highlighting its “qualities of simplicity, naivete, and gross sentimentality” (92).

But what is repressed returns in other forms. This is particularly true of nostalgia. For example, following the lead of Jean-François Lyotard, Ellen G. Friedman finds in modernist high art disguised “nostalgia” for the “master narratives that sustained Western civilization in the past and that have now been delegitimated,” particularly “the great quest and goal narratives” (240). In works like The Wasteland or Ulysses, for instance, nostalgia is masked by the “compulsive theme” in the literature of “male modernism,” namely the search for “fathers—missing, lost, or otherwise inaccessible” (241). Thus Friedman finds evidence to support Fredric Jameson’s contention that cultural forces like nostalgia exist “underground . . . protected in the culture’s unconscious, a site from which [it] still wield[s] power” (quoted by Friedman, 240). In the case of nostalgia, high art, to use Friedman’s words, can only “present the sense of loss but not what is lost” (249).

Unlike the modernists, Stowe directly expresses nostalgia because she knows that it expresses one of the dominant feelings of her readers. But she doesn’t simply paint idealized pictures of the past. Through the experiences of her two main characters in the love story, Stowe depicts how the narratives dear to Western culture have broken up into disassociated visual images and decontextualized verbal echoes. But she also demonstrates that the nostalgia for the world these narratives represent can be redirected into desire and desire can impel the imagination to reassemble the pieces of a shattered culture into a personal expression that deepens the significance of everyday life. To take one minor example, Harry deeply wants to fulfill his parent’s wish that he follow in his father’s footsteps and become a minister. Harry, however, concludes that in capitalist America such an occupation based on self-sacrifice would be “ludicrous.” But he still yearns for the kind

2. Daniel Borus draws attention to the realists’ particular dislike of the contemporary love story like the one in Stowe’s novel.
of “higher life” that his father lived. As a consequence, he redirects this longing into his career, insisting that he can give “Christ’s teaching palpable life form” through “his trade or calling,” whether it be a “coal heaver,” “merchant,” “lawyer,” or “editor” (92).

In retelling sacred narratives in the language of everyday life, My Wife and I exemplifies what many critics still consider the scandal of popular art—the way it grabs hold of the sacred narratives and images preserved in high culture and recycles them through the banal narratives and images of personal desire and melodramatic emotions. But this recycling has an important function. By giving form to nostalgia such as she does with the scene in Central Park or with Harry’s career, Stowe transforms undefined private longing into a definable communal experience. At the same time, these stories reveal that the master narratives embedded in them—the return to nature, the search for a calling—are no longer relevant. She lays to rest “backward” looking narratives, to use Friedman’s term (244), and then creates images and stories—“forward” looking narratives—which point the way towards modes of fulfillment available in contemporary life. In short, Stowe’s scandalous rewriting of sacred images and narratives conducts serious cultural work.

A good place to examine in detail how Stowe does this work is the Miss Ellery episode which occurs early in the novel. Away from home for the first time, Harry attends a traditional Sunday service. He admits that less than half of the participants “have any spiritual participation or sympathy” for the service and that he daydreamed to the point that “not a word” of the sermon (“selfishness” is “the essence of moral evil”) “reached my ear” (56). Suddenly he sees Miss Ellery:

That face, so refined, so spiritual, so pure! a baptized, Christianized Greek face! A cross between Venus and the Virgin Mary! The outlines were purely, severely classical, such as I have since seen in the Psyche of the Naples Gallery... . I gazed down on her and held my breath with a kind of religious awe... . I saw her, and only her, through the remaining hour of church. I studied every movement. The radiant eyes were fixed upon the minister, and with an expression so sadly earnest that I blushed for my own wandering thoughts, and began to endeavor to turn my mind to the truths I was hearing told; but, after all, I thought more about her than the discourse. (57–58)

This passage serves as a kind of microcosm for conveying how popular art deals with the loss of meaningful master narratives. The inability of the pastor to gain the attention of his auditors even though he was “a good man who wrote a kind of smooth, elegant... English” (56), the indiscriminate mingling of the erotic and spiritual, the Christian and the pagan, convey how in modern society cultural traditions have collapsed into historical rubble. Venus and the Virgin Mary are equally significant or insignificant. They no longer are referents for physical and spiritual ideals but merely signifiers for feminine beauty. Harry’s excessive response to Miss Ellery, however, reflects intense nostalgia for the kind of transcendent experience these figures once represented. He wants to worship something. Directing his longing
unto Miss Ellery, he mentally rummages through Western culture to find images that can give her beauty transcendent value. For this reason, Miss Ellery the person is irrelevant. She is “a polished looking-glass, gracefully reflecting every one’s whims and tastes” (76).

Because infatuation at first sight has been worn to death in the romance formula, it is easy for readers today to overlook the cultural significance of a passage like this. It traces a shift from religious transcendence (the sermon on “selfishness”) as the defining structure of selfhood to personal feelings (Harry’s response to Miss Ellery). Within the conventions of the story Stowe is telling, the most intense feeling is, of course, romantic love. In Stowe’s hands, it replaces the desire for a relationship with God. Romantic love is “sign and symbol,” she explains in her “Introductory Note,” “of something sacred as religion, indissoluble as the soul, endless as eternity.” For this reason, “all men and women that have loved truly have had their romance in life—their poetry in existence” (xi). Nostalgia for religious redemption has been redirected into an experience available to the many.

The process whereby Stowe rewrites nostalgia for religious experience into romantic stories popular in mass culture is strikingly evident in Stowe’s use of the conversion narrative, a major form of popular literature in the nineteenth century. In these stories of religious experience, to use Susan Juster’s description,

conversion . . . involved a breaking down of the unregenerate will and sense of self, and its reconstitution under the divine power of the Spirit. The convert was in a vital sense reborn, just as the sinner was essentially spiritually dead. (37)

In more secular language, conversion is an experience powerful enough “to break down pre-existing notions of the self and reaggregate the elements of selfhood into a new social persona when the individual has already achieved biological and social maturity” (39).

Stowe simply takes this pattern of breakdown and reconstruction of identity and substitutes romantic love for “the divine spirit.” Before his encounter with Miss Ellery, Harry’s life is marked by the sin of pride. As Harry is forced to admit, he was misled by the “assumption, so common in the early days of life, that we have feelings of peculiar sacredness above the comprehension of the common herd, and for which only the selectest sympathy is possible.” Invoking the language of the conversion narrative, he then explains that this sense of self “is one savoring a little too much of the unregenerate natural man, to be safely left alone to grow and thrive . . .” (68). For this reason, it is fortunate when Miss Ellery jilts Harry for a wealthy dolt, because the shock breaks down that old self, the experience of which he describes as “The Valley of Humiliation” (66):

3. Harry’s response reflects what T. Jackson Lears calls a “riot of eclecticism” which he sees everywhere in late Victorian culture: “Once sacred symbols” are uprooted from their “appropriate time, place, and purpose” and reduced to a “grab bag of symbolic forms” (33).
One’s pinnacle and battlements—the whole temple in short, that we have prided ourselves on, comes tumbling down about us like the walls of Jericho. . . . Though, like other afflictions, this is not for the present joyous, still the space thus cleared in our mind may be so cultivated as afterward to bring forth peaceable fruits of righteousness. (68)

With this breakdown of the fortress of the “pre-existing self,” Harry, as with individuals in the conversion narratives, experiences “a great awakening.” But the awakening is not to the necessity of submitting himself to a transcendent God. Rather, it is an awakening to the way his longing for the sacred misled him into endowing Miss Ellery with transcendent value. In Friedman’s terms, nostalgia for a transcendent experience has identified “what has been lost” and thereby drained it of its power to work underground. He has been saved from spending his “life in vain attempts to make a warm, living friend of a cold marble statue” (75).

But in addition to identifying what has been lost, the recognition of nostalgia motivates Harry and Eva to reorient their quest for meaningful lives. They first meet in a world-weary salon. New to the city, he feels lonely and alienated. She feels “empty-hearted” because her only identity is that of potential bride. Her independent-minded sister observes of her: “a conquered territory—has no rights that anybody is bound to respect” (184). Doing her social duty of making herself agreeable to all prospective suitors, she takes him aside into what she calls “Italy” (“a charming little boudoir”) to show him her collection of copies of famous Renaissance religious paintings, a collection typical of middle-class homes during this period. The walls of the boudoir are “finished in compartments,” each containing “a copy of one of Fra Angelico’s angels.” In addition, “a superb copy of ‘The Paradise’” hangs above the mantel and a velvet case contains “an exquisite copy of that rarest little gem of Fra Angelico’s painting, ‘The Death-Bed of the Virgin Mary’” (197). As Harry surveys these art copies, he has what appears to be a conversion experience like that which visited Paul of Tarsus: “My head swam; a golden haze was around me, and I was not quite certain whether I was in the body or not” (199).

But it is not the power of the religious images or the art that is working on Harry. It is his memory that the images evoke of his trip through Italy and the recognition that Eva has had the same experience. In short, his intense inner experience is nostalgic, not religious or aesthetic:

And so on we went, deliciously talking and ranging through portfolios of engravings that took us through past days; rambling through all our sunny Italian life .... In short, we had one of that blessed kind of times which comes when two enthusiasts go back together over the brightest and sunniest passages of their experience. (199)

As with the Miss Ellery episode, Stowe uses this scene to recycle the sacred images in high art into the secular language of feelings and personal relationships. Having been “awakened,” Harry does not make the mistake this time of using art to endow a woman with transcendent qualities. Instead, Eva’s copies of high art are appropriated to share feelings and forge a rela-

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tionship. “We can find by them who really feel with us,” Harry declares, and “friends” (not God) are “the most precious gift” which art gives. Eva heartily agrees: the arts “are like Freemasons’ signs—they reveal the initiated to each other” (198). Stowe has redirected the nostalgia for religious experience into a desire for emotional bonds with others. Harry no longer feels isolated and alienated; Eva no longer feels like a conquered territory because her relationship with Harry gives her the strength to seek love rather than marrying for wealth.

The scene in Eva’s boudoir does not complete Stowe’s effort to rewrite nostalgia for master narratives into the language of personal experience. She next turns to Emersonian transcendentalism which was very influential in the literary circle formed around the Atlantic and to which she belonged until realism became the prestigious form of literary art (Hedrick 288–90). After Harry and Eva marry, they embark on a nostalgic wedding journey back to Harry’s childhood home in rural New England—“so calm, and still, and unchanged.” Harry, who in college reads Emerson (75), parrots the transcendental expectation that in nature he will discover his true identity:

> When the whole artificial world is withdrawn, and far out of sight, when we are surrounded with the pure and beautiful mysteries of nature, the very best and most genuine part of us comes to the surface. . . . (444)

But at this point, the nostalgic search for unsullied nature comes to an abrupt end. Eva, who through love has found the strength “to be free” and to have “her own way” (446–47), intrudes on Harry’s meditations on the “beautiful mysteries of nature.” Instead of passively gazing at nature, she appropriates its fruits for her own purposes. She makes herself into a “tableau” (451) for the benefit of Harry and his family:

> Every morning it was a part of the family breakfast to admire some new device of berries or blossoms adapted to her toilette. Now, it was knots of blue violets, and now clusters of apple blossoms, that seemed to adapt themselves to the purpose, as if they had been made for it. (452)

There is more going on here than meets Harry’s eye. In transforming nostalgia for transcendence—whether through traditional religious practices, communion with Nature, or through art—into personal expression, Stowe butchered two of the sacred cows of late Victorian culture: nature and art. The sacralization of high art which Levine so vividly traces reflects the kind of nostalgic quest for the lost father that Friedman sees in modernist literature. To be more precise, the sacredness of art rests on the premise that the individual work is transparent, i.e., that one sees through it a transcendent reality. This premise still exerts force in our culture. For example, Mark C. Taylor explains how critics like Clement Greenberg or artists like Barnett Newman view painting:

> ornamentation and representation are signifiers that obscure pure form, which is, in effect, the transcendental signified. In other words, authentic art erases the signifier in order to allow the signified to appear transparently. (12–13)
The transcendental signified is, of course, another version of God the Father. In Emersonian Transcendentalism one can see even more clearly the nostal­gic quest for the Father. To use the formulation of Eric Cheyfitz and Jeffrey Steele, nature “becomes transparent or effaces herself to reveal the FATHER to the child” (Steele 102–03).

When we see how the nostalgic quest for transcendence is gendered in liter­ature and art, Eva’s actions take on a great deal of significance. This young woman, a real woman, forces Harry to respond to her opaque presence rather than to the illusion of a transparent “mother nature.” For readers who associ­ate Stowe with sentimental religiosity, a surprising reality of this act is that it reveals that in Stowe’s fictional world there is no transcendental signified. The three major media to transcendence in traditional Western culture—religion, art, and nature—lead instead to an exploration and expression of the inner world. To put this more precisely, the transcendent has collapsed into personal feelings, personal expression, and personal relationships. For this reason, artistic expression as Stowe presents it is the opposite of that conceived by Greenberg and Barnett. It is only representation (of the self) and only decoration (presenting that self to others). She thus terminates the quest for the lost father.

Eva’s presentation of herself as a “little picture” (450) also expresses her progress in gaining control over her own identity. As Mary W. Blanchard has shown, the “aesthetic” or “art for art’s sake” movement of the 1870s and 1880s strongly affected popular American culture through fashion. Many Victorian women treated “dress as an individual work of art, analogous to painting a picture” (23). As a result, they found a means of expressing their own subjectivity: “By creating herself as both performing public self and individual work of art the aesthetic woman changed traditional concepts of the female as artistic object to the female as artistic subject” (23, 22). This change is dramatically illustrated by Stowe in her contrast of Eva with Miss Ellery. When Eva dons her daily costume—her day’s work of art—she is not the artificial mirror reflecting back the male conception of feminine beauty but a woman who “naturally” expresses herself.

An episode like this, banal on the surface, reveals the cultural work of nostalgia in popular art. The yearning for communion with nature is recast as the power of feminine beauty and the privilege of high art is usurped by fashion, a creative outlet available to the many. Stowe’s willingness to express nostalgia openly identifies what has been lost (the possibility of communion with nature and the belief in the sacredness of art) and then reconstituted into an experience available to the masses.

Stowe’s final address to nostalgia concerns the longing of urban readers for the kind of life that presumably existed in the villages and farms of pre­industrial New England. This nostalgia was evident in the rapidly develop­ing market for “local color” fiction, a market she herself had helped create with The Pearl of Orr’s Island, and in the popularity of essays like Horace
Bushnell’s “The Age of Homespun.”

Unlike Bushnell, Stowe does not merely evoke a picture of the past—“so calm, and still, and unchanged” (443). She attempts to locate in it qualities that can be resurrected and applied to stem the tide of social disintegration that she sees in the city’s “grinding selfishness, and its desperate don’t-care manner of doing things” (132). Not surprisingly, she associates these qualities with feminine ones. For her, the lessons that pre-modern New England can teach are aptly symbolized by what she calls “receipt-books” and in the tradition of the “family linen.” The books, written by “mothers and grandmothers,” contain the “record of their attainments and discoveries in the art of making life healthful and caring” (454). This knowledge is so valuable that the one given to Eva by Harry’s mother is compared to the Bible. It is a “precious manual” written with “a loving carefulness” and it breathes “with human experience and family life.” The linen symbolizes the value of remaining connected to one’s history and the importance of collective effort. Spun by generations of women, it comes to Harry and Eva redolent “with the history of a family life” (453). It thus can be compared to a sacred relic. As Harry ecstatically proclaims, it “came to us fragrant with rosemary and legend. We touch them with reverence, as the relics of ascended saints” (453-54). In Friedman’s terms, after Eva gets Harry to abandon the search for the lost father, they find the lost mothers. To quote Harry, society up to this time has been structured on the model of the father but “the ideal state” should be “pervaded by mother influences” (36). For this reason, “Mary, the mother of Jesus,” is “the great archetype” of a reconstructed society (37).

In order to utilize the wisdom of the mothers in an urban setting, Eva applies the same artistic principles to the home that she does to her dress. As Blanchard notes, fashion was not the only area of mass culture touched by the aesthetic movement. “On the popular level, aestheticism took the form of resurgence of interest in the decorative arts in the middle class home.” Parlors were supposed to be “artistic” and an expression of the persons who created them (22). In Eva’s case, even though the house has a furnace, she places the andirons from Harry’s rural home in her parlor. As she explains, “You see, we don’t propose to warm our house with a wood fire, but only to adorn it. It is an altar fire that we will kindle every evening, just to light up our room and show it to advantage” (448). In short, like the parlors discussed by Blanchard, Eva’s is meant to be a “picture.” What was a necessity in rural New England—and a reminder of why young people left for the

4. Interestingly, William Dean Howells’ Their Wedding Journey was written during the same time period as My Wife and I and the journey carries Isabel and Basil through the rural northeast. However, the couple expresses no nostalgia for pre-modern America. Instead, they “cast an absurd poetry over the landscape; they invited themselves to be reminded of passages of European travel by it; and they placed villas and castles and palaces upon all the eligible building-sites” (54).

5. Peter Homans provides another interesting interpretation of the regendering of the quest in his study Theology after Freud. He argues that the “collapse of transcendence” in the modern period marks a change in human psychology from masculine “agency” to feminine “communion” and the mother replaces the father as the organizing force of symbolization. He also sees the loss of the transcendent father, i. e., the superego, as the major origin of nostalgia in modern culture (144-45, 168-69).
city— is transformed into a vehicle of personal expression. As Harry rhetorically questions:

Is not this a species of high art, by which a house, in itself cold and barren, becomes in every part warm and inviting, glowing with suggestion, alive with human tastes and personalities? Wall-paper, paint, furniture, pictures, in the hands of the home artist, are like the tubes of paint out of which arises, as by inspiration, a picture. It is the woman who combines them into the wonderful creation which we call a home. (479)

Eva agrees. The homemaker, she insists, is “what Hawthorne calls ‘the Artist of the Beautiful’” (448).

In creating her home, Eva enacts the process whereby nostalgia is redirected into personal expression and relationships. Knowing that Harry’s childhood home will vanish with the death of his elderly mother, they take not only the andirons but the receipt books and the linen to their home in an “unfashionable quarter” of New York City. But the preservation of these objects is only incidentally a homage to the past. The objects from Harry’s home become part of a random collection of other artifacts left in the wake of social and cultural disintegration. Stowe highlights this process of cultural rummaging by describing the Henderson home as “Robinson Crusoe’s island in the middle of New York” (478). From here, Eva conducts foraging expeditions in the “second-hand stores” which thrive on the wreckage left in the wake of economic competition. She treats these objects from the ruined homes of strangers as comparable in value to the andirons, linen, and receipt books. As Harry explains, “From the wreck of other homes came floating to ours household belongings, which we landed reverently and baptized into the fellowship of our own” (479).

The Henderson home thus becomes a symbol of the relationship to the past of the modern individual in mass culture. Cultural traditions are known only as a warehouse of decontextualized images, objects, and verbal echoes. Rather than waxing nostalgic about what might have once existed, individuals have to use the cultural debris to improvise a new sense of place as well as a new sense of self. For example, one of Eva’s first acts in making a home is to cut out figures from her book of “cheap Neapolitan prints” and paste them on the wall of the dining room, creating a “Pompeian salon” which Harry finds “enchanting” (477). While highbrow critics would view this decoration as kitsch, it is, like Harry’s response to Miss Ellery in church, an illustration of how high art considered as sacred is not relevant to mass culture. Popular art treats cultural images as cast-off materials which can be recycled and recombined into a bricolage of self-expression and communion. “I think,” Harry declares, that “there is an exultation in the constant victory over circumstances, in little inventions, substitutions, and combinations, rendered necessary by limited means” (472).

Stowe treats the development of community in the same fashion as she does Eva’s efforts to make a home. Disconnected from traditional social bonds of family and village, Eva improvises a fluid network of relationships
out of a diverse collection of other rootless individuals that she and Harry have met by accident in the city. In other words, just as she makes a home out of the remnants of other homes, she builds a new kind of community out of a grab bag of individuals set loose in the city. For example, her circle includes a Quaker, a Jew, and a reformed drunkard. Eva invokes the image of Madame Recamier to explain her vision of community:

“We can sit down here and make our own world. Those that we really like very much and who like us very much will come to us. My ideal of good society is of a few congenial persons who can know each other thoroughly, so as to feel perfectly acquainted and at home with one another. That was the secret of those reunions that went on so many years around Madame Recamier.”

In this fashion, nostalgia for the communities of the past is redirected toward forming what might be called a “life style enclave.” As defined by the influential Habits of the Heart in its study of individualism and community, this dominant form of association in America consists of a small group of intimate friends who share the same values and life styles. As the authors put it, “We are supposed to be able to find a group of sympathetic people . . . with whom we can spend our leisure time in an atmosphere of acceptance, happiness, and love” (83). Stowe creates an image of such an enclave at the end of the novel. The disparate survivors of the urban wasteland, including some recently acquired pets, gather in a nonhierarchical circle around Eva’s fireplace:

And now, while we have brought all our characters before the curtain, and the tableau of the fireside is complete, as we sit there all around the hearth, each perfectly at home with the other, in heart and mind, and with even the poor beasts that connect us with the lower world brightening in our enjoyment, this is a good moment for the curtains to fall on the fortunes of MY WIFE AND I. (498–99)

The point here is not how effective this scene is in constructing a vision of the future. The few critics who have studied the novel and its sequel, We and Our Neighbors, argue that Stowe’s homemaker and parlor images are inadequate to the complexity of modern life. Feminist critics are particularly disturbed by the fact that Eva eventually turns most of the domestic work over to a servant (MacFarlane 282). Even Harry’s best friend has to admit that “the house in which the golden age pastoral is to be enacted has not yet been found” (458). Even more seriously, Stowe’s home as enclave holds out no hope for addressing the social problems represented by “the wreck” that is modern urban society. The criticism of therapeutic culture in Habits of the Heart applies perfectly to Stowe’s novel: “What is missing is any collective context in which one might act as a participant to change the institutional structures that frustrate and limit” (127).

Nevertheless what Stowe accomplishes should not be ignored. Unlike her more “artistic” contemporaries, Stowe confronts nostalgia and lets it shape her narrative in a way that articulates what has been lost in modern life, particularly the religious and historical master narratives that had shaped
American culture. She then holds out the hope that the longing for the past can be redirected to a redefinition of selfhood and to a cultural reconstruction based on the desires and experiences of the typical American. While critics might view that self and culture as shallow, they should agree that Stowe is one of the few American writers who attempted to capture the psychology and the creative dynamics of the emerging mass culture.

Works Cited


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